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# A Step into The Past

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Book 15

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Huang Yi

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## Chapter 01

### Clash of the Titans

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Before Lu Buwei could say anything else, Xiang Shaolong interrupted with a laugh: "That was a good fight, isn't it? If Premier Mentor wanted Official Guan and me to stop fighting, I am afraid I will not agree to it. Is there anyone in the crowd that want this fight to end like this?"

The whole crowd erupted in loud cheers and supported Xiang Shaolong's decision to extend the fight.

With the shouting escalating to an unimaginable volume, Lu Buwei's voice is totally drowned out.

Lu Buwei did not expect Xiang Shaolong to interrupt him. Obviously, he is out to kill Guan Zhongxie. He was angered but powerless to intervene. After all, he was the one who initiated the whole thing and forced Xiang Shaolong's hand. He did not anticipate Xiang Shaolong to put up such a good fight.

Even Guan Zhongxie is at a serious disadvantage.

What shocked him the most is Xiang Shaolong's desperate fighting method. He is willing to sacrifice his own life to have Guan Zhongxie killed.

Lu Buwei is sure that Xiang Shaolong will die tomorrow. Why should he allow Guan Zhongxie to accompany him in death?

He was infuriated at Xiang Shaolong's suggestion. Now, no matter what he says, there is no way he can prevent the fight from continuing. Otherwise, others will think that he is afraid of Guan Zhongxie losing to Xiang Shaolong. This will cause Guan Zhongxie's reputation to take a beating.

Guan Zhongxie understood Lu Buwei's intention. But in the present circumstances, he must never back down or he will forever lose the chance to challenge Xiang Shaolong to a duel. With a loud cough, he paid his respects to Lu Buwei.

Everyone knew that he has something to say and quietened down. Now, Guan Zhongxie has everyone's attention.

With a solemn expression, Guan Zhongxie coolly state: "I understand the good intention of Premier Mentor. Official Xiang and I will not harm each other as this is only a friendly match. I hope to continue our unresolved battle too."

Everyone exploded into loud cheers, knowing that the show will go on.

Xiang Shaolong propped up his sword with a smile. He is in a great mood.

He has finally conquered his fear of Guan Zhongxie. At the same time, he realised that if he did not defeat Guan Zhongxie tonight, he will never have the guts to do it in the future.

His biggest advantage tonight is that his opponent will not 'sacrifice' himself to defeat him.

In the future, he will not have any more opportunities like this.

Lu Buwei's face was drained of colour, acknowledging that this fight must go on. He could imagine Xiang Shaolong's determination to eliminate Guan Zhongxie and sighed secretly.

Tonight's events have been very different from what he had visualized.

He looked at Zhu Ji with a pleading expression and was stunned to discover this Empress of Qin staring at Xiang Shaolong with an intoxicated look on her face. Thus, she did not notice him at all. Just as he hardened his resolve, Lu Gong happened to butt in: "Will the Crown Prince please decide if the fight should go on."

Now, the matter is in the hands of Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei is out of the picture. This is equivalent to slapping Lu Buwei in the face.

Xiao Pan looked around him and saw that the area was packed to the brim with his Qin people. His eyes lit up and he calmly state: "Premier Mentor, please return to your seat first!"

Lu Buwei is a crafty man who always has a ready reply. He laughed loudly: "Everyone is mistaken. It is such an exciting fight and I will never dream of stopping it. I only wanted to provide a prize for the winning fighter. Whoever wins this fight will get to marry my daughter."

When he finished speaking, the crowd began to howl and the atmosphere is electrifying.

Lu Niang Rong did not expect her father to pull such a stunt. Shocked, her face turned red and she was at a loss.

Given the situation, there is no way that she can protest.

Guan Zhongxie's eyes were filled with renewed energy.

If Xiang Shaolong is the winner, Lu Niang Rong will definitely marry him. When he dies tomorrow, Lu Niang Rong may resume her freedom to marry but will never marry a loser like him.

Lu Buwei's words are to force him to win at all costs. Guan Zhongxie's fighting strength increased dramatically and he abandoned all his earlier reservations regarding sacrificing his life for Xiang Shaolong.

All the while, Xiang Shaolong has been observing Lu Buwei. He noticed Lu Buwei winking to Mo Ao who is hiding among the crowd. Mo Ao gestured back to him and finally pointed at Lu Niang Rong. Xiang Shaolong had to acknowledge that Mo Ao is really formidable.

Mo Ao's intelligence is second to none. He actually managed to determine Guan Zhongxie's weakness to be his fear of sacrifice. With Lu Niang Rong entering the picture, Guan Zhongxie will also be fighting for a lifetime of happiness with her. Thus, he will take the fight more seriously.

Since Xiang Shaolong entered the special elite commando unit, he has undergone many years of rigorous army training. His willpower and determination are without equal. He wasn't demoralised at all but instead,

his fighting strength increased by leaps and bounds. With a smile, he glanced at Xiao Pan.

While Xiao Pan may have detected that Guan Zhongxie is now a more determined man with a strong killing aura; he cannot disobey the wishes of the crowd. He waved and proclaimed: “As Premier Mentor has indicated, the fight will continue.”

All the cheering immediately subsided and the crowd became serious and quiet, focusing their attention on the two expert swordsmen.

At the side, Qin Qing, Ji Yanran, Jing Jun and the others were equally nervous. With all their hearts, they wished that they can lend Xiang Shaolong a helping hand but unfortunately, he must fight alone.

With a cool expression and his eyes shining like electricity, Guan Zhongxie fixed his gaze on Xiang Shaolong. In his hands, his sword slowly moved into an attacking pose and his killing aura is highly intense.

Everyone can feel the ferocity of his weapon and knew that if he attacked, it will be an extremely ferocious move. For Guan Zhongxie to exude such an emotion to the crowd, his fighting strength has reached its peak.

Xiang Shaolong felt that his fighting strength is not as intense. Inspired by the samurais’ intense fighting strength, he made up his mind to display a similar samurai attack pose. For Guan Zhongxie who has never seen a samurai, it will become an advantageous distraction.

He parted his legs and adopted a half squat position. He grabbed his sword with both hands and pointed the sword at Guan Zhongxie briefly before he slowly raised the weapon high above his head just like what a samurai warrior would do.

Everyone, especially Guan Zhongxie was taken aback at his unusual pose. The crowd began to whisper among themselves as everyone is puzzled by Xiang Shaolong's unique posture.

Guan Zhongxie was intimidated. He felt that no matter how he tried to attack Xiang Shaolong, Xiang Shaolong will swing down his sword and attack his forehead just like before. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong is now holding the sword with both hands and the incoming blow will shatter his skull for sure. For a moment, he dared not attack.

His swordplay relied heavily on the opening pose. With this mental obstacle, his strong fighting strength has decreased by thirty percent.

Xiang Shaolong can sense Guan Zhongxie's energy dropping due to his trick. Grabbing this golden opportunity, he coldly snorted and advanced forward. Above his head, the Mohist Sword slammed down heavily in the direction of Guan Zhongxie's face. Although this is a sword stance from the Mohist Swordplay, Xiang Shaolong has executed it with two hands instead of one.

Guan Zhongxie is unwilling to retreat but did not want to use his sword with both hands. He let out a grunt and swung his sword upwards to defend against the Mohist Sword.

PONG! The Mohist sword was slightly deflected to one side. Xiang Shaolong managed to gain an opening and pressed on with five more attacks with each of them faster than the last one. Shaken, Guan Zhongxie was forced to take several steps back. If not for his superior arm strength, he will have succumbed to the vicious attacks and lose his footing.

Xiang Shaolong's supporters are cheering wildly for him. Eighty percent of the crowd wanted to see their hero defeat Guan Zhongxie.

Lu Buwei's and Mo Ao's expression became very ugly. They did not foresee Xiang Shaolong using such a strange strategy and overcoming Guan Zhongxie despite his superior arm strength.

But Xiang Shaolong knew that if he allowed Guan Zhongxie to attack him, he will be defending himself in agony.

In addition, Guan Zhongxie is blocking his moves using the least amount of strength. Despite being in a disadvantaged position, his energy consumption is much lesser compared to Xiang Shaolong.

If not for his heavy Mohist Sword, it will be hard for Xiang Shaolong to force Guan Zhongxie backwards.

Xiang Shaolong knew that Guan Zhongxie is still being tricked by him. While he is still gaining the upper hand, he laughed loudly and retreated. Using only his right hand to hold his sword, he pointed the sword at the terrified Guan Zhongxie, stating: "Official Guan is a true expert. Thanks for showing mercy to me!"

Guan Zhongxie was publicly embarrassed. A cold murderous look flashed across his eyes and he coldly hissed: “Official Xiang is about to win. Why did you retreat out of a sudden? Has your wound reopened?!”

Xiang Shaolong took this chance to catch his breath. He smiled: “Official Guan is really good at telling jokes. We are not here to kill each other and must take turn showing our true abilities to Miss Niang Rong. Earlier, I attacked while you defended. Now, I will defend while you attack.”

Even though they have stopped fighting with their swords, they are still ‘fighting’ with their words. Everyone was thrilled and continued watching the excitement.

Guan Zhongxie lost the debate as he was angry with Xiang Shaolong’s remark. He knew that he has spoken out rudely and reminded himself not to underestimate Xiang Shaolong. He smiled back: “If this is the case, I will attack as you instructed.”

The moment he finished speaking, his eyes shone energetically at his opponent.

Xiang Shaolong knows his opponent like the back of his hand. Guan Zhongxie is better than him in terms of arm strength and fighting experience.

Luckily, his earlier tricks have eroded his confidence. Otherwise, he will definitely lose.

In this life and death situation, he dared not take any chances. Clearing his

mind of all thoughts, he adopted a defensive pose and eyed Guan Zhongxie with caution. Every single part of his body and mind is in a state of emptiness, displaying one of the three Mozi Killing Stances: Defending Attack. He guarded his body well and quietly awaits Guan Zhongxie's attack.

Guan Zhongxie realised that this is the last opportunity for him to repair his reputation. Ideally, he wants to defeat Xiang Shaolong. It will be good to force Xiang Shaolong to retreat into submission. Otherwise, it is as good as losing the fight.

All along, he has complete confidence that he can defeat Xiang Shaolong. But from tonight's fight, he was forced into a disadvantaged situation many times despite not losing the battle yet. As a result, his confidence is shaken and he cannot fight with his full potential.

The onlookers are increasing tremendously. From a banquet attendance of two hundred odd guests, now, there are more than three thousand people watching the fight. No one wanted a break as the fight is extremely exciting and nerve-wrecking.

Guan Zhongxie's Longstrike sword wavered slightly. When his fighting strength has reached its peak, his eyes focused ahead and he took large strides towards Xiang Shaolong. A strong sword and a stronger sword aura sliced through the air.

Xiang Shaolong stood as steady as a mountain and his eyes are shining coldly, giving the impression that he is as solid as a rock and is unafraid of the waves clashing in.

Guan Zhongxie took another step and is now ten steps away from Xiang Shaolong. Now his fighting strength is even higher than before. He coldly questioned: "Is Official Xiang determined to defeat me and win Lu Niang Rong's hand in marriage?"

Xiang Shaolong cursed him secretly. Guan Zhongxie is really a scumbag. Knowing that he is unwilling to marry Lu Niang Rong, he purposely said these words to distract him. If Xiang Shaolong is reminded that he has to marry Lu Niang Rong after winning the fight, his fighting spirit would naturally decrease and so will his fighting strength.

This is also part of Mo Ao's brilliant plan by asking Lu Buwei to marry Lu Niang Rong to the winner.

To defeat a man, you must first destroy his will. This is a fact that Mo Ao knows very well.

Xiang Shaolong recomposed himself and laughed: "Miss Niang Rong is such a rare beauty; I believe Official Guan is trying to defeat me so that you can marry her."

His words are out to distract Guan Zhongxie too. He wanted to remind Guan Zhongxie that he will die of poisoning tomorrow. Thus, it is not important whether he will marry Lu Niang Rong or not. But Guan Zhongxie cannot afford to lose. With this thought messing up his head, he will be unable to unleash his full potential.

Guan Zhongxie did have the intention and was slightly surprised. His sword

resonated with a strong killing aura and his strong desire to win can be felt.

Xiang Shaolong was not alarmed but was delighted instead. Cha! He took a step forward and waved the Mohist Sword around, taunting Guan Zhongxie.

Guan Zhongxie was forced to attack him with a troubled mind. As Xiang Shaolong is remaining in a defending position, he did not break his promise to let Guan Zhongxie attack him.

Everyone was inebriated at their intellectual contest and their swordsmanship contest.

Guan Zhongxie has no other way out. He howled and Longstrike transformed into a blazing trail and struck towards Xiang Shaolong's face like a thunderbolt.

His attack is fierce, powerful and solid. Everyone was startled at his attack and forgot to cheer.

Xiang Shaolong has successfully forced Guan Zhongxie to strike earlier than he had intended. His Mohist Sword swung out like the wind and put up a watertight defence.

In a short span of time, Longstrike and the Mohist sword has clashed ten over times. PONG! PONG! PONG! Everyone was highly thrilled and was jumping up and down with excitement. Both men began to fight at an even faster speed and their movements are so fast it became blurred. The crowd was so immersed in the fight that everyone forgot to cheer.

Using the advantage of the heavy sword, Xiang Shaolong countered every blow head on to destroy Guan Zhongxie's confidence and pride.

Except for the three killing stances, the Mohist Swordplay emphasizes on defence rather than attack. Originally, it is meant to force the enemy to submit rather than destroying the enemy. However, every defensive move has an element of attack, which is similar to the Killing Stance: Defending Attack. Therefore, Guan Zhongxie cannot show off his powerful chain attacks.

In the past, when Mohist Juzi Yuan Zong is training Xiang Shaolong, he only used a few casual strokes but managed to make Xiang Shaolong retreat a few steps. Thus, the defensive Mohist Swordplay is more than meets the eye.

Despite all his psychological tricks and strategies, he cannot defeat Guan Zhongxie, not to mention taking his life.

He intentionally retreated earlier and tricked Guan Zhongxie into attacking him now. With his invincible Mohist Swordplay defence, he can prevent himself from being defeated. Additionally, Guan Zhongxie must guard against the Killing Stance: Defending Attack. In the end, he will still be regarded as the winner in the eyes of the crowd.

Since there is no clear winner, he need not marry Lu Niang Rong.

Tonight, Xiang Shaolong has used up every one of his abilities in order to counter his nemesis Guan Zhongxie.

The more Guan Zhongxie fought, the more fearful he was. In front of the

crowd, his attack is powerful, fierce and quick. But in his mind, he knows that his energy is depleting faster than Xiang Shaolong's. After thirty odd stances, he has yet to force Xiang Shaolong to take one step back. If this carries on, he will be drained and Xiang Shaolong can use this opportunity to finish him off.

He is a top swordsman and knows that he is committing a big mistake. He purposely slowed down and created an opening to trick Xiang Shaolong into attacking him.

Unknown to him, Xiang Shaolong's Mohist Swordplay is a gentlemen's swordplay with no hints of malice. Even if there is an opening, he will not take advantage of it. Guan Zhongxie was petrified, thinking that Xiang Shaolong has seen through his trick. His fighting strength dropped by another ten percent.

All around them, the crowd finally broke out into loud clapping and cheering. The noise produced is deafening.

PONG! After a final clash, Guan Zhongxie retreated while he still has some strength left. Otherwise, he will risk losing his life when he is completely drained of all his strength.

Xiang Shaolong did not wish to kill him. Moreover, his own strength is also heavily depleted. He wanted to retaliate but his body can no longer hold out.

At the same time, he sighed with relief. If Guan Zhongxie pressed on his attacks, he may be the one who will eventually succumb.

The fight still ended in a draw.

The crowd became extremely quiet.

Both men can no longer conceal their loud panting sounds.

Xu Xian stood up and announced: "Let me be the judge. This fight has ended without a clear winner. Miss Niang Rong's marriage will be arranged at a later date." The entire crowd exploded in a thunderous applause and wild cheering, showing their appreciation at the exciting duel. Even after a long time, the cheering did not subside.

## Chapter 02

### Calm Before The Storm

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When Xiang Shaolong returned to his table, he received a hero's welcome from his wives and men. But deep in his heart, he knew that he is inferior to Guan Zhongxie in terms of physical strength and swordsmanship. He managed to end the fight on a draw because he had the advantage of the heavy wooden sword. If he is using Bloodwave to fight him, he will be badly defeated for sure. Thus, he did not feel any sense of true happiness. In fact, his legs are still trembling uncontrollably.

Opposite him, Prince Dan nodded at him to show his gratitude for Xiang Shaolong taking revenge on Guan Zhongxie on his behalf.

Guan Zhongxie returned to Lu Buwei's table with an expressionless face and received compliments with a silent nod. Although he has a look of disappointment on his face, in actual fact, he has become the second man after Wang Jian to match Xiang Shaolong's fighting skills. As a result, his status is now elevated.

Everybody around them are debating among themselves and refused to leave the banquet area. Zhu Ji saw that the banquet has become a chaotic debating ground and announced that the banquet has come to an end. After Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji have taken their leave, Xiang Shaolong returned back to his own tent.

Ji Yanran and the ladies inspected his injury and discover that the wound has reopened and blood is pouring out. They hurriedly applied a fresh coat of medicine and tie a new bandage over the wound.

Still in high spirits, Jing Jun, Zhao Zhi and Wu Tingfang are still discussing about the heart-stopping battle.

Xiang Shaolong enquired about Teng Yi from Ji Yanran. He learnt that Teng Yi has set off the moment the banquet started. Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Guan Zhongxie is really a top swordsman and he has the strength and power match his skills. It is not that I do not want to kill him but I am truly not capable of doing so."

Jing Jun smiled: "But he still cannot overpower you."

Ji Yanran shook her head: "Little Jun is mistaken. Guan Zhongxie failed to win tonight because from the very beginning, he did not fight with his full potential. After all, he believed that Hubby will die tomorrow. Why should he kill Hubby and earn the wrath of the Qin people?"

Everyone listened to her explanation and their expressions become serious. In this case, even if Guan Zhongxie cannot defeat Xiang Shaolong, he can still match him evenly in a fight.

Zhao Zhi added: "But the onlookers do not know this. I believed that everyone, including Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie are thinking that Hubby does not want to marry Lu Niang Rong. Therefore, when he is gaining the upper hand, he suddenly stopped and wanted to defend instead. Even until

now, they still do not comprehend Hubby's trickery."

Pleased, Ji Yanran reminded: "Zhi Zhi speaks with reason. This fight has benefitted us in some ways despite creating some problems too. Hubby must work harder. Sooner or later, Guan Zhongxie will use Lu Niang Rong as an excuse to challenge you again. If you can add more power to the strange and fast swordplay, I am sure Guan Zhongxie will ultimately succumb to you."

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization. If he can get the Yue blacksmith to forge a samurai sword for him, that will be wonderful.

In this instant Huan Qi, who was out on patrol duty suddenly rushed into the tent. He came to Xiang Shaolong's side and whispered: "Lord Gaoling's men have started to take action."

In Xiao Pan's tent, Huan Qi has just finished his latest report on the movements of Lord Gaoling's rebel army. When he was about to continue with his analysis, Xiang Shaolong interrupted him: "What does Crown Prince think about the enemies' actions?"

Li Si's face glowed with admiration. Xiang Shaolong is the only man in the Qin Court who understands the Crown Prince way better than anyone else.

Xiang Shaolong found it hilarious. He has two kinds of feelings towards Xiao Pan. On one hand, he is the person who watched Xiao Pan grow up and is familiar with his character. Xiao Pan became a changed person when his mother Lady Ni committed suicide after being raped. Filled with revenge and suspicions, he is hungry for power to ensure his survival. Even towards

Xiang Shaolong whom he trusted the most, he will still think about Xiang Shaolong's recommendation before going along with the idea. On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong knew that one day, Xiao Pan will be the powerful Qin Shi Huang who unites the whole of China. Because of this, he has absolute trust in his capabilities unlike other people who continue to treat him like an immature youngster.

With these two factors combined, Xiang Shaolong is full of love and respect for Xiao Pan, trying his best to create opportunities for him to grow and learn.

Xiao Pan is delighted: "Subject Huan is well-informed of the enemy's situation. I will remember this. When everything is over, I will reward you handsomely."

Overjoyed, Huan Qi kowtowed and thanked him profusely, thinking that the Crown Prince is indeed an extraordinary man. If he said the same thing to Wang Jian, he will be more than happy if Wang Jian gives an approving nod. The chance of him getting a reward is even lesser.

After a short contemplation, Xiao Pan predicted: "Since Lord Gaoling is shifting his men downriver, they are likely to attack us with more than just fire or water. Since our forces are much bigger than his, I am certain that he will create different scenarios and throw us into disarray so that he can create an opportunity to overcome us."

Huan Qi saw how this teenage Crown Prince is making such a rational analysis and is full of admiration for his brilliance. His happiness in serving a

capable ruler like Xiao Pan is written all over his face. The sincere glow in his eyes is far more effective than any common flattery. He did not even display such an emotional expression when facing Xiang Shaolong.

His confidence swelling, Xiao Pan thought for another few seconds before adding: "Lord Gaoling's first move is to set his own tents on fire. With the wind blowing the flames, the fire will burn upwards. The first tents to be burnt down will be those behind the wooden defending gates. He can easily shoot a few fire arrows across the defending gates and the royal tents will start burning too. To ensure the safety of the Empress and the Royal Family, everyone will head towards the Jing River. Once everyone crosses the river, the danger is over."

After his presentation, even Xiang Shaolong is pleasantly surprised. This future Qin Shi Huang is truly formidable and can envision the battle as if he is there to see it personally. Before the fire attack, Lord Gaoling's men can spray the tents and the ground with oil. Once the fire starts to burn, it will be an unstoppable inferno. If news of his rebellion wasn't leaked to them, Lord Gaoling does have a high chance of success.

Xiao Pan explained the crux of the problem: "Lord Gaoling's main goal is to get me. He will definitely dress up his own men as palace guards and plant them in strategic locations to assassinate me whenever possible. This is also another reason for him to create as much chaos as possible."

Li Si and Huan Qi are smart enough not to interrupt him and allowed him to share all this thoughts. Xiang Shaolong intentionally inquired: "Crown Prince, in your opinion, what are the possible tricks Lord Gaoling has up his sleeves?"

Xiao Pan gladly replied: "He will still use a water flood attack. Lord Gaoling will purposely exaggerate the fire situation and coerced the royal family and all the important officials to run for the opposite shore. When everyone is in a panic and rushing over the bridges, he will release the dams upriver. Adding heavy logs to the flood water, the bridges will be submerged by the water or smashed up by the logs. If I am on the bridge, Lord Gaoling's scheme would have succeeded immediately. If not, he would still have succeeded in dividing our armies into two. By then, the rebel army will attack us. If they shoot fire arrows at us, it will make the situation even more chaotic. Among the confusion, he can assassinate me. It is the most poisonous scheme I have ever come across."

Huan Qi is full of praise: "The Crown Prince is awesome! You have my full respect."

Xiao Pan intimately continued: "During that time, Lu Buwei will send his killers and his divers to kill whoever he wants. In addition, Subject Xiang will die of poisoning and the Cavalry Army will be leaderless. In the end, Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie can claim their rewards for fighting off the rebels. At the same time, they will take over the main military command from the dead Lu Gong and Xu Xian. Our Great Qin will end up in their hands. Hng!"

The three men understood Xiao Pan's meaning. Lu Buwei is making use of Lord Gaoling's rebellion to kill whoever he wants. After Lord Gaoling's rebellion has failed, all the credit and power will go to him. Lord Gaoling will die as a muddle-headed scapegoat.

Mo Ao's schemes are really chilling to the bone. Fortunately, he will be dying

tomorrow. Otherwise, Xiang Shaolong will die under his poisonous hands sooner or later. This is all fated, just like fate will create a Qin Shi Huang.

Before the sun is up, the hunting groups have set off for their morning hunt. Prince Dan and his men are not participating as a sign of protest at Lu Buwei's humiliation.

Lu Buwei is in high spirits. He waved good morning to Xiang Shaolong happily as he believed that Xiang Shaolong's life will end today. When Guan Zhongxie ran into Xiang Shaolong, his previous air of confidence is much reduced and he no longer has the look of despise on his face. It was replaced by twenty percent of respect and thirty percent of regret.

For a man as highly skilled as Guan Zhongxie, it is hard for him to find a worthy opponent. Now that he has found a worthy competitor in Xiang Shaolong, he will also lose him at the same time due to the poisoning. Thus Guan Zhongxie is in a dilemma and regrets that he will never have the chance to defeat this Qin Number One Swordsman.

Zhu Ji, Qin Qing and Ji Yanran were all absent from the morning hunt. As Xiao Pan's party is leisurely hunting for the sake of hunting, they decided to return to camp earlier.

The remaining hunters continued their hunt.

On the way back, Lu Niang Rong intentionally rode to Xiang Shaolong's side and shot a vicious look at Li Si. Terrified, Li Si made up an excuse and took his leave by slowing down his horse. When Li Si is out of earshot, she scolded:

“Xiang Shaolong! Did you purposely end the fight on a draw instead of winning it so that you do not have to marry someone you hated?”

Xiang Shaolong was agonized. This daughter of his arch enemy is stubborn and long winded. She already mentioned that she is unwilling to marry him and knew that he will not live past tonight; why did she come up now and accuse him of hating her? But he also learnt that she does have some feelings for him. Otherwise, she would not have bothered to come and make things difficult for him.

He bitterly replied: “Things are beyond my control. Strictly speaking, I have lost because my wound did reopen in the end. But I did not say it as I do not want to give up the opportunity to fight for your hand in marriage! Does Third Mistress understand my feelings?”

Lu Niang Rong’s face turned red under his staring. Initially, her face brightened up before darkening again. She lowered her head and bit her lips as if she is trying to say something but held herself back. Xiang Shaolong guessed that her conscience is being pricked and is fearful that she may spill the beans about the poison pill. He was about to interrupt her when in front of them, Lu Buwei is waving at her to join him. Besides Lu Buwei is Mo Ao and he appears to share Xiang Shaolong’s fear as well.

Lu Niang Rong shot him another look and sighed softly before she rode ahead to join her father. At this point, Lord Changwen rode up to him and bitterly laughed: “Official Xiang can forget about our proposal last night. I spoke to Ying Ying about marrying you last night but was rejected despite my continuous pleading. Ai! Love cannot be forced. Nonetheless, my brother and

I are very grateful towards you."

Xiang Shaolong did not feel threatened but felt more relaxed instead. He secretly thought that Guan Zhongxie must have made her felt very good in bed. Without trying out his own love making skills first, she will not marry him. To think that he has to fight Guan Zhongxie on the battlefield and also on bed! Honestly speaking, he is not as jealous as before. She can marry whoever she wants and he is not in the least interested.

Back at the camps, Xiang Shaolong has just finished instructing his men to protect his wives when Lu Gong sent someone to summon him.

In Lu Gong's tent, Xu Xian, Wang He and a few other loyal military leaders are having a secret discussion. Even Bai Chong who lost to Zhou Zihen is also present.

With a pleased expression, Lu Gong sat down beside him and intimately pat his shoulder, praising: "Shaolong put up a good fight last night and forced Guan Zhongxie to retreat like a coward. You even interrupted that traitorous Premier Mentor who tried to end the fight halfway. You have earned my respect. If you ever lead an army to war, you will be invincible."

Wang He frowned: "Why didn't you take the chance to kill Guan Zhongxie last night? If he hides in the shadows and ambushed us with his arrows, I am afraid we will all die an unexplainable death."

Xiang Shaolong understood that Guan Zhongxie's marvellous archery skills have startled the whole of Qin. Since he created a favourable impression last

night that he is a better fighter than Guan Zhongxie, he will hide the truth about his own inability to kill him.

He bitterly smiled: "Because my wound reopened, I was forced to defend instead of attack. Regarding Guan Zhongxie's archery skills, I am afraid he will not get any chance to use them tonight."

He proceeded to reveal Xiao Pan's assessment of Lord Gaoling. In the same breath, he added: "For this battle, the Crown Prince will be the main leader and we will just act according to his orders!"

Lu Gong sighed: "In my lifetime, I have served five different Kings but none of them have the strength, wisdom and capability of the present Crown Prince. There is hope for us. I wonder if I can live to see the day the Crown Prince unite the world."

Xiang Shaolong is relieved to hear his words. Xiao Pan's daily performances plus the fact that he is not related to Lu Buwei has won him the loyalty of the Qin military. With this backing alone, he will succeed the throne without much difficulty.

Xu Xian praised: "Despite his young age, Crown Prince has performed well and is full of courage and intellect. He is like a hidden gem. Although the two late Kings have been poisoned to death and the state is in peril, we now have a capable leader to guide us. It is truly our good fortune!"

After Wang He praised Xiao Pan too, he added: "It is easy to deal with Lord Gaoling but Mo Ao will be assisting Lu Buwei in his scheming. I am concerned

that there will be some unexpected attacks which will take us by surprise. Why is Shaolong not paying any attention to Lu Buwei?"

Xiang Shaolong explained: "To win every battle, you must know yourself and your enemy well. We have full information about Lord Gaoling's plans and have made accommodations for Lu Buwei's family warriors. After Mo Ao dies of poisoning, we will all be safe from his scheming. Under the leadership of the Crown Prince, Lu Buwei cannot salvage the situation even if Sun Wu comes back to life."

Xu Xian suggested: "Shall we lay a trap to bait Lu Buwei? We can use this opportunity to get rid of him. If there is ample evidence, Meng Ao cannot obstruct us from executing him."

Just as Xiang Shaolong was feeling a big headache coming, luckily, Lu Gong protested: "If we wanted to deal with Lu Buwei at the same time, it will make things even more complicated and I don't think we are up to it. Now, the two betrayers Cai Ze and Wang Wan are supporting this traitor Premier Mentor. If we failed to succeed, we may be counterattacked by him. With the Empress supporting him, I am afraid we will be the ones to suffer in the end. Old Xu, you must be more patient. Don't forget that we still have to watch out for Du Bi and his powerful men."

Wang He added: "Now, Meng Ao is leading the Qin army to the three new eastern provinces. He is fiercely loyal to Lu Buwei. If he knows that we are going after Lu Buwei, he may rebel and even declare the three provinces to be independent from Qin. When that happens, we'll be in deep shit."

Xu Xian sighed loudly but did not insist any further. Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand this thing called fate. He has a chance to kill Lu Buwei right now but cannot do so because of circumstances. After further discussions, Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang He left to see Xiao Pan. To avoid drawing attention to himself, Xiang Shaolong did not go along and left on his own.

The minute he came out of the tent, he came face to face with Lu Dan'er and Ying Ying. The two ladies must have had an enjoyable hunt judging from the happy expressions on their faces. They noticed that Xiang Shaolong is alone and their eyes lit up. Lu Dan'er playfully cajoled: "Good Morning, Superman!"

Because she had rejected his marriage proposal, Ying Ying awkwardly remarked: "I was about to look for you."

She faced Lu Dan'er and begged: "Dan'er! Can you let me say something to Superman first?"

Lu Dan'er opposed: "You cannot keep him for yourself!" And whispered into her ears: "Have a good talk!"

Ying Ying helplessly dragged Xiang Shaolong two steps away and whispered into his ears: "It is not that I do not want to marry you but this is all too sudden. Can you give me more time to consider?"

Xiang Shaolong felt that she is actually trying to stall for time for Guan Zhongxie and shot her a dirty look.

Ying Ying stomped her foot, scolding: "Don't let your imagination run wild. I am not that kind of person that you think I am!"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "If you really want to reject me, you can find all kinds of excuses. In the future, I will not pay any more attention to you. Please forgive me for being cruel."

Ying Ying was stunned and stared at him without blinking. Lu Dan'er intercepted in and detained Xiang Shaolong, whining: "Come! Let's go fishing. I wonder why everybody is behaving so strangely today. Even that playful monkey Little Jun says he has no time to keep us company. But Official Xiang can take his place!"

Even if Xiang Shaolong is free, he is not keen to fool around with them. Moreover, today is an important day for everyone. He did his best to coax them before slipping away.

## Chapter 03

### A Happy Turn of Events

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Just before noon, the hunting groups are making their way back to the camps and the atmosphere has become much livelier.

The palace guards and the cavalry army, taking charge of the internal and external security respectively, are quietly moving into their positions to counter the imminent rebellion.

On the whole, everything looks just the same. They will not make any large manpower deployments so as not to raise the alarm and alert Lord Gaoling's men.

Jing Jun has become Xiao Pan's chief intelligence officer. With a group of Wu Family Elite Warriors, they have formed an intelligence network spying on Lord Gaoling and Lu Buwei's activities.

There are no intelligence reports yet as Lord Gaoling will not dare to act before the night hunt has begun. Moreover, it will be ridiculous if he tried to set the camp on fire in broad daylight.

At lunchtime, the camp is reasonably peaceful.

The night hunters have retired back to their tents to get some rest so as to be in tip top condition later.

Time passed slowly.

When the horn is being sounded, the hunting groups start to gather at the main assembly ground. Finally, the air is filled with excitement again.

Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji and the high ranking officials are watching the hunting groups from an inspection platform. As the hunters begin to set off for the hunt, those who knew about the rebellion are feeling more and more stressful.

Ying Ying and her female warriors have left to join the night hunt as well.

The sun gradually descended behind the western mountains.

The campsite torches are being lighted up and there is smoke in all directions. Within the defending gates, it is bustling with activities as the palace guards are setting up the place for the dinner banquet.

Prince Dan and his men have abruptly left for Xianyang City. Although this is something Lu Buwei did not expect, his suspicions were not raised. After all, they were ridiculed at the banquet last night and probably do not want to embarrass themselves again.

In the semi-darkness, the action has secretly begun.

The first column to move is the Cavalry Army led by Huan Qi. Half of them quietly swam across the Jing River and took up strategic positions on both sides of the river. No one is allowed to leave their position to prevent any

leakage of information.

Within the campsite, the palace guards have silently increased their defences at the Royal Tents.

Jing Jun's intelligence unit has finally come to life. Everything that is happening inside and outside the camp cannot escape their detection. These men have undergone strict and rigorous intelligence gathering training taught personally by Xiang Shaolong. To them, this is a task that they have been well-prepared for.

Before they entered the banquet area, Xiang Shaolong and Lu Gong stood on a slope outside the wooden gates. They were in great spirits as they enjoyed the wind blowing against their skin and looking at the vast landscape before their eyes.

Lu Gong sighed: "After Bai Qi, we lack a capable general who can lead our army to countless victories. Now that we have Shaolong, I can finally rest easy." Xiang Shaolong humbly asked: "Lu Gong has been praising me non-stop. Since I came to Qin, I have yet to fight a single battle. What makes you think I will be a capable general?"

Lu Gong laughed: "You can judge a man accurately from small details. When Bai Qi first came about, he took care of every big and small detail just you. Everyone was full of admiration and his men fought hard under his leadership. Shaolong may not have fought a proper war yet but you have everyone submitting to you and willing to lay down their lives for you. This is a basic requirement for every capable general."

Pausing for a while, he added: “The first step to becoming a great general is soldier management. From your carefree appearance, I can tell that you are well-versed in soldiering. If laws are not enforced, there will be disorder; If training is insufficient, soldiers cannot fight; If you are carefree because you are well-prepared, you can fight ten thousand battles and win every one of them. So from Shaolong’s carefree and well-prepared outlook, I was reminded of Bai Qi in the good old days.”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded. Lu Gong’s words do make incredible sense. When he was fighting against Zhao Mu in Handan City, he has Teng Yi and Jing Jun to help him, the elite warriors are well-trained and he has Pu Bu and Liu Chao as spies. When everything is properly planned, he was indeed relaxed and carefree. However, at that point in time, he did not realise that it is a sign of good soldiering!

In Sun Zi’s Art of War, this is known as ‘proper delegation of appropriate work to the appropriate person.’

Lu Gong became more enthusiastic and continued: “A born genius is only good enough to last one generation. There is no lack of talent; only lack of people who can recognize talent. There is no lack of people who can recognize talent, only lack of people who can use talented men effectively. I noticed that Shaolong has recommended Li Si, Huan Qi and Wang Jian to the Crown Prince and know that Shaolong’s foresight is second to none. In the area, I am afraid even Bai Qi is not your match.”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty at this undeserved praise.

They were interrupted by a palace guard who came to invite them inside the defending gates for the banquet. Thus, their conversation came to an end.

The sun has finally disappeared behind the western mountain.

Mo Ao is about to die.

As per normal, the banquet is extremely lively. As expected, Lord Gaoling has given an excuse to skip the banquet.

Ji Yanran and all the ladies are here, sharing a table with Qin Qing. They came here with the intention to watch a good show. After all, the safest place is here within the defending gates.

All the high ranking officials, including Xiao Pan are all dressed in their hunting outfits. This is the last banquet and according to the Qin customs, the banquet will last throughout the night while waiting for the night hunters to come back by dawn tomorrow.

Jing Jun, Huan Qi and Lord Changwen have their duties to attend to and were absent from the banquet.

Xiao Pan is very energetic and his two eyes are shining brightly, showing his excited mood.

Lu Buwei is in his usual great spirits and frequently toasted and chatted with Zhu Ji.

Mo Ao surprisingly showed up for the banquet and is seated at the back with Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen. It may be due to his desire to see Xiang Shaolong dying before his own eyes or that he need not conceal himself any further.

Seated between Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie, Lu Niang Rong kept her head lowered throughout the banquet and did not even take a single look at Xiang Shaolong.

After a group of palace guards performed an exciting sword dance and the air is filled with enthusiastic clapping, one of Jing Jun's fellow villagers Jing Shan came up to Xiang Shaolong's back and reported in a low voice: "Lord Gaoling's men are beginning to spray oil on the tents behind the defending gates. Master Jun has intentionally sent some men to patrol the area so only a limited area is affected."

Xiang Shaolong whispered back: "What about Lu Buwei's men?"

Jing Shan replied: "There are three hundred family warriors from Lu Buwei's side who have left the camp and dived into the Jing River. Master Jun is sure that they will begin to kill Lu Buwei's enemies when the water attack has broken up the bridges and everyone is in a state of panic."

When Jing Shan left, Xiang Shaolong remarked to Lord Changping beside him: "Bro! It is time!"

Lord Changping exchanged a thrilled look with him and quietly left his seat. On the other side, Li Si moved closer to Xiang Shaolong and whispered: "From Lu Buwei's expression, he must be feeling puzzled because you have

yet to show any signs of poisoning. Hei! This is interesting!"

Pausing, he added: "There is something I still do not understand. Lu Buwei knowingly allowed Lord Gaoling to run amok. Isn't he afraid that he may be killed by Lord Gaoling among the confusion?"

Xiang Shaolong observed that Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan have left their seats. He smiled: "Firstly, there must be Lu Buwei's spies among Lord Gaoling's men so Lu Buwei already has a clear idea of Lord Gaoling's ambush plans. Although Lu Buwei only has an escort of about one hundred men, he has another batch of men who will slip in during the confusion. When I die of poisoning, Guan Zhongxie will take over my Cavalry Army. All Lu Buwei need to do is to stand beside the Empress and the Crown Prince. With Mo Ao giving him advice on the spot, everyone will have to listen to his commands."

He sighed: "He must take some risks to gain the benefits."

Li Si cannot hold back his laughter: "This is so complicated and I have never thought of that. Hei! Look at the Crown Prince's alert expression. Last night, he only slept for several hours and today is such a busy day. Despite all that, he is still looking fresh and vigilant. The late King is much weaker compared to him."

Xiang Shaolong agreed. The most successful people are always the most energetic people. Otherwise, they cannot handle the multi-tasking and associated stress. Xiao Pan is Qin Shi Huang and his energy level is surely higher than ordinary people.

At this moment, Guan Zhongxie left his seat and took a detour to Lao Ai's table, engaging him in a conversation.

Xiang Shaolong nearly wanted to send someone to eavesdrop on them but suppressed this desire. He wondered if Lao Ai's name is on Lu Buwei's assassination list?

Jing Shan came again to report: "From the light signals, Lord Gaoling's men hiding upriver have pushed giant logs and rafts into the water. When the camp catches fire, they will lead a coordinated attack. Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan have left the campsite. One of them is heading towards the Jing River while the other one is likely to be liaising with another group of Lu Buwei's family warriors. Master Jun has instructed Pu Bu to trail him. If they tried to do anything funny, they will be killed without question."

After Jing Shan departed, Xiang Shaolong leaned towards Li Si and informed "It is time. Official Li must alert the Crown Prince now. I will go and have some fun with Lu Buwei."

The two men left to carry out their tasks. After finishing his deployment, Lord Changping came back and ran into Xiang Shaolong. He updated: "All the members of the royal family have been transported to a safe place and everything is going as planned. Now, I will protect Empress and Crown Prince. Shaolong must be careful."

Both men exchanged a smile and went on their separate ways.

Xiang Shaolong took a detour and came to Lao Ai's and Guan Zhongxie's side,

smiling: "What are the two of you talking about? Both of you looked so happy."

In actual fact, both men are speaking with a serious expression on their faces and there was no sign of happiness. Hearing his inverse description, they know that Xiang Shaolong has a hidden meaning in his words.

Guan Zhongxie smiled awkwardly: "Without Official Xiang, our conversation is indeed boring. Come! Let's have a drink or two!"

Their table is three tables away from Lu Buwei's table. But as Xiang Shaolong, Guan Zhongxie and Lao Ai were all well-built men; they managed to distract a surprised Lu Buwei who is speaking with Zhu Ji.

Xiang Shaolong raised his head and looked at the crescent moon high up in the sky. He shook his head: "The sky is dark tonight which makes it favourable for a sneak attack. I am in charge of security and I should not drink. Official Guan, please forgive me!"

Despite Guan Zhongxie's iron nerves, his face changed colour slightly.

An ignorant Lao Ai smiled: "With Xiang Shaolong here, any attackers will suffer a huge defeat."

Xiang Shaolong decided to use this opportunity to erode more of Guan Zhongxie's confidence. He deliberately commented: "There are many strange occurrences in this world that can happen unexpectedly. One cannot change the will of Fate. Does Official Guan agree with what I said?"

Guan Zhongxie is feeling really uneasy. When his face lost even more colour, Xiang Shaolong left with a smile on his face.

Xiang Shaolong walked towards Lu Buwei and Mo Ao.

His mind is filled with endless thought and countless emotions.

Since the tragic death of Princess Qian and the four maids, he has always been suffering at Lu Buwei's hands. All the anger and pain is hidden deep in his heart and he has suffered greatly.

When Wu Tingwei is executed due to Lu Buwei's bribery and his beloved King Zhuangxiang died from Lu Buwei's poisoning, his biggest wish is to insert a knife into Lu Buwei's body.

But since he knew that Lu Buwei will live for a few more years, his passionate wish has transformed into a deep pain.

Although he managed to remove Lu Xiong from his official post, it only vented a small part of his frustration. He did not feel a great sense of satisfaction yet.

But today will be different. Because Mo Ao is going to die.

Without Mo Ao, Lu Buwei may not use such a devious scheme to harm him. Since there is no way to be sure, Mo Ao is still considered as the main reason for his pain.

After tonight, he will not give Lu Buwei any face.

Only when he brings out his full potential can he last until the day when Xiao Pan is coroneted.

Before Mo Ao dies, he must make fun of Lu Buwei and Mo Ao as a way of venting his frustration.

With this thought, he went to Mo Ao's table.

Sitting in front of him, Lu Buwei and Lu Niang Rong turned around in astonishment. Lu Buwei smiled: "Shaolong is coming to drink with me?"

Zhu Ji turned her attention to Xiang Shaolong and was baffled at his solemn expression.

Guan Zhongxie followed Xiang Shaolong to Mo Ao's table. Observing that he is coldly staring at Mo Ao, his face lost more colour.

The lively banquet is still carrying on with wine drinking contests, chatting and joking. Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang He have received their secret signal and slipped away one by one.

Xiao Pan is behaving normally and is having a conversation with Zhu Ji. However, their eyes are focused on Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong scanned Lu Buwei and Lu Niang Rong before the corner of his mouth curled up in a smile: "I am here to present my thanks to Mister Mo."

Even with Mo Ao's intelligence, he has no idea what Xiang Shaolong is talking about. Nonetheless, he was taken aback and stood up in surprise, asking: "Why is Official Xiang thanking me?"

The banquets of Qin are casual and informal. There are many people who are standing and challenging each other's wine capacity. Although the three men are standing and talking, it did not attract any attention. Moreover, they are standing at one of the rear tables.

Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan have stopped speaking and are listening intently to their conversation.

Lu Buwei also felt that something is amiss. He stood up with a wine cup and came in between them, inquiring: "What does Shaolong want to thank Mister Mo for? I am also interested to find out!"

Xiang Shaolong took a glance at Guan Zhongxie who has a suspicious look on his face before officially stating: "First, I want to thank Mister Mo for getting Drunken Wind Brothel owner Mister Wu Fu to give me Flying Dragon. In the future, I will use it to kill my enemies on the battlefield to express my gratitude."

DANG!

Lu Buwei's hand trembled and his wine cup fell down to the ground, shattering into pieces.

The three men's countenance changed instantly.

Xiang Shaolong looked at the broken pieces of the wine cup and broke out into laughter: "On the ground, a flower blooms. Wealth and riches to follow. That's a good sign. I pray that Premier Mentor will live to a hundred years and enjoy great health."

With these words, the three men buckled. Even Zhu Ji's expression changed drastically as she can sense that something is very wrong.

Mo Ao suspiciously questioned: "How am I related to Brothel Owner Wu Fu who gave Official Xiang the precious spear?"

Lu Buwei's face darkened. When Xiang Shaolong wished him to live to a hundred years, he is obviously stating the reverse. Thinking that Xiang Shaolong will soon die of poisoning, he will not clash with him in front of Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan.

Cai Ze, Wang Wan and a few other guests from the neighbouring tables are starting to notice their exchange. All of them have stopped their activities and are looking in their direction.

Xiao Pan is certain that Xiang Shaolong is creating an opportunity for him. He excused himself and left.

Lu Buwei and the others knew that Xiao Pan is leaving but as Xiang Shaolong has their full attention with his shocking statements, they could not be bothered about other matters.

A cold murderous look flashed past Xiang Shaolong's eyes. He stared at Mo

Ao and interrogated: "The wisest man will slip one day. I only mentioned that I was given Flying Dragon but did not say what it is. How did Mister Mo know that it is a precious spear?"

When Mo Ao is speechless after realising his mistake, Guan Zhongxie enquired in a deep voice: "What is the second thing that Official Xiang wants to thank Mister Mo for?"

Xiang Shaolong faced the sky and laughed: "Of course it is for Miss Guiyan's kiss. Mister Mo has kissed her many times and should know better than me."

The three men lost control and the faces were drained of colour.

Mo Ao is truly a genius. Clutching his throat, he coughed: "You..."

Xiang Shaolong continued looking at the sky and sighed: "It is almost time. Mister Mo's calculations are infallible. You should know the exact time of your death."

His eyes shining icily, he indicated to Mo Ao and state one word slowly after another: "When you count others, don't forget to count yourself. Does Mister Mo understand the meaning of these words?"

Lu Buwei coldly snorted: "Shaolong!"

Xiang Shaolong coldly faced him and shot back in a deep voice: "Where are Zhou Zihen and Lu Chan? It is very chaotic outside. I hope they don't get killed in the confusion."

Lu Buwei's face darkened even further and roared: "Commander Xiang, what do you mean by these words?"

YAH!

The colour on Mo Ao's face is changing rapidly. With his two hands clutching his throat, he kept coughing but cannot say a single word. His eyes were filled with dread.

Petrified, Guan Zhongxie rushed forward and supported him, asking: "What is going on?"

Mo Ao shivered for a while and large beads of perspiration is flowing down from his forehead. In the corner of his mouth, blood is seen trickling out. It was a hideous scene.

Xiang Shaolong threatened Guan Zhongxie: "Official Guan had better stay right here. Otherwise, do not blame me when I punished you for AWOL."

He faced Lu Buwei and plainly smiled: "This sky is dark tonight. Premier Mentor must be careful when he crosses the bridge."

When Mo Ao collapsed into Guan Zhongxie's arms, Xiang Shaolong has already left a long time ago.

Torches and war cries can be detected simultaneously from the direction of the river. The first rebellion since Xiao Pan took over Qin has finally begun.

## Chapter 04

### Lifetime's First Victory

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While all the Qin officials and Royal Family members are in a state of panic, Xiao Pan, under the escort of Xu Xian, Lu Gong and Wang He, gracefully returned back to his seat. He loudly commanded: "Lord Gaoling has rebelled. I will now personally lead the fight against his rebel army. All of you can remain in your seats for the time being. After I have taken care of him, I will come back and drink with all of you again."

Although everyone is alarmed by the loud shouting and fire burning, they are situated safely within the defending gates and noticed that the palace guards around them are all armed and well-prepared. Calming down, they cheered loudly for Xiao Pan.

Zhu Ji stood up and had a quick look at the pale-faced Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie who is supporting a dying Mo Ao. She questioned: "Crown Prince! What is going on?"

Xiao Pan coldly replied: "Empress can rest assured as I am in control. Men! Escort Empress back to the tent for a rest."

Zhu Ji understood that given the present circumstances, it is not suitable to ask any further questions from her elusive son. Still at a loss, she left under the escort of the palace guards cum palace maids and returned back to her tent.

Xiao Pan faced Lu Buwei, assuring: "Premier Mentor and Third Mistress must have suffered a shock. Please have a rest in my tent. When the rebellion has been quashed, I will invite both of you out for a celebratory drink."

Lu Buwei glanced at the wheezing Mo Ao helplessly. A dozen palace guards came up to him and invited him to rest in the main Royal Tent.

Loud crashing sounds can be heard from the direction of River Jing as the giant logs collided into the bridges. Sounds of water rushing down the river can also be heard, pushing the fear in everyone's heart to the maximum.

But after looking at Xiao Pan's confident composure and swift issue of military orders, everyone was slightly comforted.

Lu Buwei knew that if he disobeyed his instructions, he will lose his head on the execution ground. Sighing, he took a last look at Guan Zhongxie and Mo Ao before he left with Lu Niang Rong.

By now, the palace guards have prepared the warhorses. Xiao Pan pacified the banquet guests one more time and mounted his warhorse. Under the protection of the three generals and the palace guards, he courageously galloped out of the defending gates.

Mo Ao finally breathed his last.

Guan Zhongxie's body went numb. For the first time, he can feel the real fear of having Xiang Shaolong as his enemy.

Tonight, they have suffered multiple defeats. Lu Buwei and Lu Niang Rong are as good as under house arrest. Mo Ao is poisoned to death and he has lost his bearings. If he tried to leave the banquet area, he will die an unexplainable death under the hands of the palace guards.

At the same time, he knew that Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen were as good as dead. Xiang Shaolong will never let them off.

When the fire attack has just begun, the Lord Changping brothers led five thousand of their palace guards into Lord Gaoling's rebel army camp and began a killing spree.

The fire fighters have prepared wet sand in advance and hid them among the grass and the trees. They managed to prevent the fire from spreading.

When Lord Gaoling tried to attack the campsite with three thousand soldiers, they discovered that they have been surrounded by Xiao Pan's army. Like a trapped beast, they fought a losing battle.

Leading two thousand cavalry soldiers, Jing Jun intercepted a group of Lu Buwei's family warriors led by Lu Chan. He fired a string of arrows and killed many of their men and horses before he attacked them using a pincer formation. It was an onslaught.

At this point in time, all the four bridges haven been smashed to smithereens. As another army of rebel soldiers ventured down river on wooden rafts, they were crushed by large rocks that were catapulted down by Huan Qi and his army of five thousand cavalry soldiers who were

ambushing them from higher ground. Tragic cries filled the air.

Their shields may have helped if it was an arrow attack but it was large rocks that were being hurled at them. Moreover, there was nowhere they could hide in the middle of the river. More than a hundred rafts were squarely hit and they sank immediately. The rest of the rebels hurriedly rowed to the shore but were mercilessly slaughtered by another group of cavalry soldiers hiding among the trees.

With an air of authority, Xiao Pan travelled between the two battle sites and used torch signals to issue commands to his men.

Xiang Shaolong himself led another two thousand cavalry soldiers and conducted a search along the Jing River. He could not find any traces of Zhou Zihen and the divers. He guessed that they must have sensed that something is amiss and swam to the other side of the river and slipped away.

He could not help but sighed. Lu Buwei will survive this episode. If Zhou Zihen and the divers are apprehended, there will be sufficient evidence to nail Lu Buwei. Despite all his work, he cannot change the course of history. But what role does he play in this thing called fate?

Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei are invited to join the banquet again. Lu Gong and the other two generals are already seated at their tables.

Ji Yanran and the other ladies were overjoyed to see their beloved husband return safely. Even the aloof Qin Qing smiled sweetly at him.

All the officials kneeled down and paid their respects to Xiao Pan, pledging their loyalty to him. Xiao Pan is so overwhelmed that his face is totally red and he toasted them in return.

Xiang Shaolong is comforted. After tonight's event, Xiao Pan has secured an infallible position in the hearts of the people of Qin.

Jing Shan came up and reported: "Lu Chan managed to slip away. The people receiving him are from outside the capital and are definitely not Lu Buwei's family warriors."

Xiang Shaolong was forced to accept this fact. With Mo Ao's intelligence, they will not leave behind any traces of evidence.

Thinking about this, he could not help but looked towards Lu Buwei.

Mo Ao has been carted away and Guan Zhongxie is expressionless. However, Lu Buwei is acting as per normal and drinking happily with Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji. Xiang Shaolong gives him two thumbs up for his acting skills.

Shouting at the top of their voices, Lord Gaoling and his military leaders were dragged into the centre of the banquet ground. They were tightly bounded by strong ropes and were forced to kneel down by Lord Changping and the palace guards.

Everyone became silent.

Firstly, Xiao Pan asked Zhu Ji for instructions. Zhu Ji sighed: "You do as you

deem fit." Lord Gaoling's hair is untied and in a mess. With traces of blood on his clothes, his eyes were burning with hatred as he stared viciously at Xiao Pan.

A palace guard was about to press his head down in a kowtow when Xiao Pan stopped him. He plainly state: "You tried to rebel and scheme against the rightful King. Lord Gaoling, do you realise your mistake?"

Lord Gaoling loudly scolded: "Pei! Since when is a b@sterd like you fit to call yourself..."

Before he finished his sentence, Lord Changping who is standing beside him stuffed a piece of cloth into his mouth. A palace guard on the other side hit him heavily on his back. Lord Gaoling moaned in pain and fell down to the ground. It was a pathetic sight.

Acting as if nothing has happened, Xiao Pan faced Lu Buwei and asked: "Premier Mentor, what is the punishment for staging a rebellion?"

Lu Buwei generously state: "It is punishable by death. The Crown Prince should lock him up behind bars and announce his crimes to the people. Then, you can proceed to execute him."

With everyone solemnly watching him, Xiao Pan nodded: "Premier Mentor speaks with reason. But there is no need to wait any longer before we execute them. Men! Bring all of them to the shore of River Jing and cut off their heads at once. Do not bury their bodies but let them lay exposed in the wilderness and be ravaged by wild beasts."

Nobody expected this teenage Crown Prince to be so ruthless. After all, Lord Gaoling is a member of the royal family. If not for King Zhuangxiang, he would have been the King of Qin. Now, he has to die in the wild without a proper burial place. Everyone is shocked and subdued by the dominating character of this future Qin Shi Huang.

Lord Gaoling raised his head in surprise. As his hands were bound and his mouth was stuffed, he is unable to protest.

Some of his conspirators were shaking with fear while some others have fainted on the spot.

Under Lord Changping's command, the palace guards dragged Lord Gaoling and his men out of the defending gates to be executed.

Maintaining his strict expression, Xiao Pan coldly added: "Arrest every family member of the rebels. The males shall be sent to work in the western territories and the females shall be palace maids. Every descendant of Lord Gaoling is to be arrested and executed without pardon. Let this serve as a warning to those people who harbour ill intentions."

Every Qin official was as quiet as a dormouse and it was so quiet you can even hear a pin drop.

Xiang Shaolong felt that Xiao Pan is too high-handed but when he noticed that everyone behaved normally, he realised that it is a common practice for the family members to be punished together with the criminal.

If it was Lord Gaoling who captured Xiao Pan, Xiao Pan and himself will suffer a similar fate.

There is nothing more that he can say.

This punishment method is one of the ways to maintain law and order. With such a harsh punishment, everyone will be a law-abiding citizen.

Xiao Pan continued: "The person who scored the most merit this time is Huan Qi who has just joined the Cavalry Army. He was the one who discovered the enemies' scheming which allowed me to prepare an effective counterattack. Now that we have successfully triumphed over our enemies, we must not forget his contribution. I will bypass the standard protocol and promote him to the rank of General. General Wang Jian did a good job of grooming him and also accomplished several feats in the northern war against the Xiong Nu. He shall be promoted to Great General with immediate effect."

Xiao Pan has proven himself by quelling the rebellion. Now that he is promoting the men who have fought well, there is no way Zhu Ji can intervene. Lu Buwei can only wallow in self misery.

Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang He have been consulted regarding these promotions. Obviously, they will not voice any opposition.

Huan Qi is now busy chasing after the remnants of the rebel army with Jing Jun. For the time being, this wonderful news has yet to reach him.

Xiao Pan words are partly true. His real motive is to adopt Xiang Shaolong's suggestion and use Huan Qi to set up a special elite force that will report directly to himself. In the future, this will assist him greatly in countering Lao Ai and Lu Buwei.

Originally, Xiao Pan wanted to promote Xiang Shaolong to be a Great General too but was rejected by Xiang Shaolong because he lacked military contributions.

He is not interested in power and authority.

Xiao Pan continued: "General Huan Qi shall stay in the vicinity of the capital and construct training camps. He shall be tasked with training new soldiers that are drafted from all over Qin. This will aid us greatly when we set out to unite the world in the future. Wang Ben is a valiant fighter who killed the first twenty enemy soldiers. I will promote him to be General Huan Qi's Assistant General and they will work hand in hand to serve the nation. Empress, Premier Mentor, Lieutenant General, Great Generals and Officials, does anyone have anything to add?"

Zhu Ji can see that her precious son has finally grown up but the gap between them is widening day by day.

Xiang Shaolong is the main mastermind behind tonight's event and Lu Buwei has a part to play too with his scheming. However, both men did not tell her anything about their plans. Feeling dejected and lost, she cannot help but looked over to Lao Ai. Is he the only man that she can really depend on?

Xiao Pan repeated himself: "Empress! I am waiting for your instructions."

Suddenly, Zhu Ji felt that she is very tired of everything. She shook her head: "Crown Prince can make your own decisions."

Lu Buwei took this chance to cut in: "The Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry are more than enough to defend the capital. Why do we need another army? Will the Crown Prince please reconsider."

In his heart, Lu Gong is cursing: D@mn you b!tch! He chortled: "Premier Mentor's words have highlighted the problem. The Palace Guards, Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry are limited to the capital defences. If there is any trouble in the vicinity of the capital, we will be at a loss. Take the uprising of the three eastern provinces as an example. All the Qin soldiers near the capital have been deployed away, providing Lord Gaoling with this opportunity to ambush us. It is absolutely necessary to create this new army."

Xu Xian added: "Now, the three allied states are hostile towards us. We have to face the harsh reality that we may have to fight them along the official roads. With this new army, we will not be afraid of any uprisings in the new eastern provinces."

Lu Buwei was flabbergasted.

This is his biggest flaw. He is an academic official. Without Meng Ao by his side, he is not fit to debate military matters with these Generals who have years of military experience.

The support of the Generals is extremely crucial for Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan concluded: "It shall be decided then. Commander Xiang, receive your order."

Everyone was startled. What does Crown Prince want Xiang Shaolong to do?

Only Lu Gong, Li Si and the rest of the Great Generals know what is going on.

Xiang Shaolong left his table and went forward to Zhu Ji's and Xiao Pan's table, kneeling down.

Xiao Pan retrieved a token of authority which a palace guard helped to pass to Xiang Shaolong. He instructed: "Lord Gaoling managed to assemble an army with over ten thousand men and even brought them so close to Xianyang City. I am sure there is someone helping him in the background. I want Commander Xiang to leave the capital and investigate this matter. If you discover any men who are supporting the rebels, kill them without mercy. In your absence, Assistant Commander Jing will temporary assume your main duties."

In a loud voice, Xiang Shaolong accepted his command.

Xiao Pan barked: "The banquet shall end now. My dear Subjects, please have a good rest in the meantime. When the bridges have been repaired, we will go to the River Jing shore and await the night hunters to come back with their catch."

When Xiao Pan is sending Zhu Ji off, all the officials kneeled down respectfully and submissively.

In this moment, Xiang Shaolong is moved to tears.

All his years of hard work has finally paid off.

From tonight onwards, Xiao Pan will build his legacy as Qin Shi Huang.

The authority of the Qin Court is no longer in the hands of the officials. Even Lu Buwei has to submit to him.

When he comes back after killing Tian Dan, he will sow discord between Lao Ai and Lu Buwei, making them fight among themselves.

After all that he has gone through, he should finally enjoy some peace of mind.

## Chapter 05

### Mysterious Attackers

---

By the time the hunters returned from their night hunt, Xiang Shaolong has left with Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and the Eighteen Guardians. They rushed toward the Qin / Chu border to liaise with Teng Yi.

Since the death of Zhao Qian and the four maids, this is the first time he is enjoying true happiness.

Mo Ao is gone; Xiao Pan has the full support of the Qin military and even impressed the people of Qin in a successful battle.

Because of Lao Ai, Zhu Ji will be less supportive of Lu Buwei.

With these turn of events, he should finally enjoy some days of peace.

However, there is still a scar left in his mind.

When he left with Zhao Qian and the other ladies on the last mission, he did not anticipate any danger to befall him. Out of a sudden, his nightmare began. It was only tonight when he defeated Lu Buwei soundly can he finally catch his breath.

Still, he was fearful of the uncertain future.

Following the travelling path he had decided earlier with Teng Yi, they travelled as quickly as they can for seven days and seven nights. They crossed the Eastern Ridge and the terrain has become flatter. On this night, they set up camp and lit a campfire beside a small river.

Somehow, Xiang Shaolong is feeling very restless. He did not have any appetite for the food hunted by Wu Yan Zhu, Jing Shan and the other Guardians.

Ji Yanran was surprised: "Is something bothering Hubby?"

Zhao Zhi smiled: "Are you thinking about Sister Fang and Bao'er?"

Xiang Shaolong eyed the cackling fire suspiciously and replied in a deep voice: "No. I am feeling very uneasy recently. In fact, this feeling came about when we left Xianyang City. Tonight, this feeling is even stronger than before."

Ji Yanran's face lost some colour and she warned: "Hubby is not an ordinary man. If you have this feeling, then something must be amiss." She turned to the Guardians who are cooking some wild animals over the fire and asked: "Did you guys hear what he said?"

Jing Shan stood up: "Let's spy on our surroundings."

The Guardians respected Xiang Shaolong as if he is a deity. When they heard his words, everyone raised their self-awareness and left accordingly.

After the Guardians have left, Zhao Zhi remarked: "Logically speaking, there

should not be anyone following us, especially Lu Buwei's men. Little Jun and the Palace Guards should be watching them closely and it is almost impossible for them to slip away and attack us. This is a complicated issue."

Ji Yanran gently asked: "Is it possible that Hubby's restlessness is due to other reasons? From the way it looks, it doesn't seem like anyone is following us!"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I am not a superhuman who can detect things that are happening far away from me. But after so many years of living in a dangerous environment, I am extra sensitive to ambushes or stalkers. We will have our answer soon enough. Jing Shan's nose is better than a hunting dog's nose."

Zhao Zhi weakly leaned into his bosom, whispering: "I am scared!"

Xiang Shaolong understands that she is thinking about that terrible night when Zhao Qian was killed. Hugging her shoulder to calm her fears down, he assured: "With me around, no one can harm you."

Ji Yanran looked up to the dark sky and softly commented: "If there is really somebody following us, then it is a valid reason for Hubby to feel extra restless tonight. After all, this area is generally flat and..."

AH!

A tragic cry shattered the tranquillity of the wilderness, proving that Xiang Shaolong's worries are not unfounded.

Zhao Zhi's countenance changed: "Isn't that Wu Da's voice?"

Wu Da is one of the Guardians. He is known for his nimble limbs and his quick-wittedness. If he was ambushed just like this; either the enemy is very highly-skilled or the trap is very well-laid.

Xiang Shaolong and the two ladies jumped up on their feet. They proceeded to arm themselves and disengaged the horses from one another.

They dared not put out the fire or they will lose touch with the rest of the Guardians.

The burning fire serves to remind them about the impending danger because they are now the targets of some mysterious attackers.

Until now, they have no information about the enemies.

Suddenly, the Guardians returned in a state of panic and their faces are filled with grief. Wu Yan Zhu is carrying Wu Da on his back. Wu Da was heavily injured with one arrow through his back and another arrow through the side of his body. He was breathing laboriously and his clothes are soaked with blood.

An emotional Zhao Zhi began to cry after seeing the usually energetic Wu Da so badly injured.

Wu Shu is about to put out the fire when Xiang Shaolong stopped him. He instructed: "Yanran, please stop the bleeding first. Break the arrow but do

not touch the arrow head.”

Before he finished speaking, Yanran is already trying her best to save Wu Da.

Wu Yan Zhu and the other Guardians are close to Wu Da and their relationships are like real brothers. Their eyes turned red and they spat at the fire which betrayed their location.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this is a matter of life and death. He cannot afford to be careless. He calmly asked: “Who are they and how did they attacked you?”

Everyone’s attention focused on Wu Yan Zhu. Apparently, he and Wu Da are a team and they ran into the enemies together while the others did not run into any enemies.

Wu Yan Zhu took a deep breath and suppressed his grief, explaining: “Wu Da and I headed to the east. Just when we wanted to climb a cliff and look down from there, the arrows were fired at us.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed. The road to the east is the direction to Chu. In this case, the mysterious attackers may have surrounded them completely.

But it is pitch black now. He is certain that the enemy will not dare to attack them before the sun comes up tomorrow.

When the sun comes up tomorrow, they will all be killed.

Zhao Zhi suddenly cried out even harder. Everyone was shaken and looked down at Wu Da. True enough, Wu Da has stopped breathing.

Xiang Shaolong had a brainwave and prevented the Guardians from hugging Wu Da's corpse in grief. He hollered: "Let me do something first!"

He thought hard about emergency resuscitation in the 21st century.

Wu Da has always been strong and fit. Moreover, the arrow did not penetrate any of his organs. He has stopped breathing because he has lost too much blood and the heart has temporarily stopped pumping. It may be still possible to resuscitate him.

First, he laid Wu Da on a piece of flat ground and strongly pressed down on the area where his heart is. After several pushes, Wu Da's body shook once and he resumed breathing and his heart resumed pumping. In the end, Xiang Shaolong did not have to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Ji Yanran and everybody else were completely blown away. Exchanging glances at one another, no one can believe what they just witnessed. They even forgot to cheer at Wu Da's recovery.

Xiang Shaolong took out a dagger and warned Wu Da: "You mustn't fall asleep. If you do, you'll be dead."

Hardening his heart, he dug the arrowheads out with his dagger. Ji Yanran quickly applied some medicine to stop the bleeding.

Xiang Shaolong stood up and instructed his men to cut a few young trees to construct a stretcher. The Guardians saw that he can even bring a dead man back to life and can feel their confidence soaring. They viewed Xiang Shaolong like an immortal from heaven and their fighting spirit increased dramatically.

After Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi bandaged Wu Da's wounds, they came to Xiang Shaolong's side. Zhao Zhi was full of admiration: "Hubby is full of miracles. You can even bring a dead man back to life!"

Ji Yanran smiled: "I have seen so many of his outrageous methods that this is nothing new."

Her eyes scanning the pitch black surroundings, she whispered: "We have neglected somebody! Can Hubby guess who it is?"

Xiang Shaolong was pondering how to escape this impending attack. Hearing her words, he guessed: "Du Bi!"

Zhao Zhi exclaimed: "Ah!"

Ji Yanran deduced: "It must be him. Lord Gaoling's men and horses can reach such a short distance away from Xianyang City without any detection. It must be Du Bi supporting him."

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization: "Now I understand. All along, he is watching from the sidelines. If Lord Gaoling is successful, he will try to reap some side benefits. Now, he thought that we are really out to look for rebels

working with Lord Gaoling. He took this opportunity to trail us and tried to find a chance to kill us.”

Ji Yanran softly sighed: “Since we never considered about this possibility, we have been too careless and ended up in the present situation. But I am certain that there are not too many men on our trail but they are all expert fighters.”

Zhao Zhi’s face turned pale and she bit her lip: “It will be daylight in another four hours. What shall we do?”

Wu Yan Zhu and Jing Shan have constructed a stretcher and are using it to carrying Wu Da while waiting for Xiang Shaolong’s instructions.

Xiang Shaolong leaned over and kissed Ji Yanran’s face. He gladly commented: “Yanran’s words have saved all of us.”

He faced everyone and announced: “When the enemy tried to kill Wu Da with arrows, it is because they lacked manpower and cannot surround the forest to ambush us. They wanted to scare us into staying here.”

Everyone’s spirits lifted after hearing his words but were perplexed at the same time. It is pitch-dark everywhere. It is impossible for the enemy to attack them but it is equally impossible for them to escape because no one can see what is ahead of them.

Xiang Shaolong state in a deep voice: “If the enemy wishes to ambush us with limited soldiers, they will be based in high positions. We will slip away by

walking in the river. Firstly, we will not lose our way and secondly, the high mud banks on both sides of the river can protect us from the enemies' arrows."

He then smiled: "Without any lights, what can they hit by shooting blindly into the darkness?"

With their horses, everyone walked down the river slowly. The river water is about waist deep.

In this kind of rigorous conditions, it has shown that their years of strict training have not gone to waste.

To prevent others from learning about the Wu Family Elite Army, eighty percent of their training is conducted during the night. Walking through the water in the dark is nothing to them.

It is even more challenging to have their horses following them obediently without a single sound.

Leading the way is Wu Shu and Jing Shan. They are holding onto a shield each in case of an attack and Jing Shan is the best wilderness navigator. He is the best person to spy on the situation ahead of them.

Another two Guardians are in charge of ferrying the wounded Wu Da while another Guardian is leading the horses. Everyone else including Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi are holding their crossbows in their arms. In case of any confrontation, they will fire their arrows mercilessly.

After travelling for ten over miles without any interruption, everyone knows that the most crucial moment has come and raised their alertness.

Coincidentally, the river has flowed to some uneven ground and the water level rises and falls accordingly. The sounds of gushing water are able to cover the sounds of their wading.

They were surrounded by dense forests in all four directions. Although stars can be seen beyond the canopy of the trees, the river area is still pitch black. The air is filled with the stench of mud and rotting leaves.

With his animal-like instincts, Jing Shan continued to lead everyone forward.

After walking for another ten odd steps, the river bed sinks even lower and the mud banks are even higher as a result.

The trees here are even thicker than before and the stars are hidden from sight. Like a bunch of blind men, everyone is moving forward based on their intuition and sense of touch.

Right at this moment, strong coughing sounds can be heard on the left bank.

Everyone was shocked and immediately stopped moving and increased their guard.

Although they have anticipated that they will encounter some enemies, they did not expect it to be so sudden and without any warning at all.

They are stuck below in the river. If the enemies fire their arrows down at them, no one will be able to stay alive.

All it takes is for one of the horses to whinny and everyone will be dead.

Luckily, they cannot see the enemy and the enemy cannot see them too.

From the right bank, a voice scolded: "Are you trying to scare me to death? All the spirits and ghosts would have been frightened off by your coughing."

On the left bank, someone softly laughed: "All of you are intimidated by Xiang Shaolong and are so easily agitated. After we have shot his men, I am sure that he will not dare to wander around recklessly. Moreover, we have laid horse-tripping ropes in all the strategic locations, including the river."

Still standing motionlessly in the river, everyone was feeling extremely nervous but was relieved at the same time.

While the enemies were talking and distracted, Jing Shan used a dagger and felt his way under the water. He cut three horse-tripping ropes in succession and cleared the obstacles away.

Just as they were about to continue moving, footsteps can be heard from the forests on the left side.

In a short while, an enemy messenger arrived and announced: "Orders from Master Bai. Tomorrow morning, we will attack them according to plan. Whoever killed Xiang Shaolong will be rewarded with five hundred taels of

gold and whoever can catch Talented Lady Ji alive will be rewarded with one thousand taels of gold. Everybody clear?”

In the river, everyone was stunned. Ji Yanran’s body is actually worth twice as much as Xiang Shaolong’s life.

It is meaningless to debate with the enemy over the reward amount. With Jing Shan leading the way, they left the enemies further and further behind.

At daybreak, they were only two miles away from the danger zone.

They climbed up a little hill and observed the enemy from afar.

Wu Da’s condition has stabilized and everyone’s spirits rose.

The Guardians stood guard in all four corners while Jing Shan climbed up a tree and analyzed the surroundings.

Below the hill is a vast expanse of grasslands and there are trees all over. Once in a while, the river can be seen flowing among the grasslands and flocks of birds are flying across the orange sky, forming a colourful and vibrant panorama.

Xiang Shaolong and his two pretty wives were leaning against a large rock, sighing that the scenery is indeed beautiful but they are not in the mood to enjoy it. Ji Yanran whispered to Xiang Shaolong: “Last night, the enemies mentioned that their leader is surnamed Bai. Among Du Bi’s family warriors, there is a man named Bai Fei. He is well-known in Qin for his tracking and

ambushing skills. Originally, he was a horse thief in the northlands but offended the King of the Xiong Nu so he escaped south and started working for Du Bi. If this is the man who is ambushing us, then we are in deep trouble."

Xiang Shaolong was amazed: "Why is Yanran so familiar with Du Bi's men?"

Ji Yanran kissed him lightly and gently replied: "I am concerned for you! I am helping you to do these things that you are too busy to do. Don't simply dismiss Sister Qin as a simple woman. She is actually very well-informed about everything happening inside and outside Qin. This information about Du Bi is from her sources."

Xiang Shaolong glanced at their campsite last night and decided: "If this is the case, we now have a chance to ambush Bai Fei. He will be the man that is leading the group chasing towards us sooner or later. We must present him with a shower of arrows and this will take care of all our worries."

As the morning sun is showing more and more of itself from the east, sounds of human talking and horses neighing can be heard from afar. A group of roughly five hundred men are riding through the dense woods towards them.

The men are split into five groups and the leading group is the smallest one with about fifty men and their speed is incredibly fast.

What is even more startling is that they only spent a short amount of time and managed to determine that they have travelled down the river and are now chasing in their direction.

But this is something they anticipated as Bai Fei is an expert horse thief.

Ji Yanran is using a special bow that needs to be supported with her leg. The shooting range is one thousand feet but as they are shooting down from a higher ground, the range is even further.

Since Bai Fei will lead the chase and be the first rider, they will know who exactly to shoot.

As their enemies approached them, everyone's heart is thumping wildly and they are having difficulty breathing.

If they cannot kill Bai Fei who is the tracking expert, coupled with their superior numbers and highly-skilled fighters, it will be extremely precarious situation for them. Additionally, they have the burden of Wu Da who is injured.

Over the two mile chase, Bai Fei only stopped three times briefly before they entered their firing range. Because of the thick vegetation, they did not have the chance to get a clear firing target.

Bai Fei is indeed an extraordinary man. He weaved in and out of the forests, making it hard for anyone to shoot him.

Bai Fei the professional horse thief cum assassin must have some true abilities to be able to survive until today.

Right now, Bai Fei happened to stop in a forest clearing. Without hesitation,

Ji Yanran fired her arrow. The moment the bow sounded, Bai Fei evaded to one side and the arrow brushed past the horse and hit the grass below.

The shooting mechanisms rang out continuously.

Wu Yan Zhu and his fellow Guardians sent their arrows flying non-stop at Bai Fei. Bai Fei's horse may have been struck down but the man himself has disappeared among the trees.

Bai Fei must have a keen sense of sight, smell and hearing.

The enemies are thrown into disarray. They quickly dismounted from their horses and hid among the trees and bushes.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed.

He will now have to play a challenging cat-and-mouse game with them in this wilderness.

If he let his guard down, this will be his final resting place.

## Chapter 06

### Borrowing a Raft

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The warhorse let out a long grunt and its front legs kneeled down before it collapsed on the ground, throwing Zhao Zhi onto a grass patch. Xiang Shaolong and everyone hurriedly dismounted and helped an exhausted Zhao Zhi up. Xiang Shaolong ordered his men to release Wu Da who is tied to another horse and could not help but feel a huge sense of loss. For three days and three nights, they had been riding non-stop but were still unable to shake off their pursuers. Now, the worst-case scenario had happened: Their horses were beginning to break down.

Far ahead of them were the Qin Ridges which were made up of several ridges intertwining between one and another. The more he looked at them, the lower his spirits sank. But he knew if they managed to reach there, their chances of survival would increase tremendously, unlike the flatlands where there was no place to hide. Regrettably, even with fresh horses, they would need at least three days and three nights of endless riding. Assessing the long distance between themselves and the Qin Ridges, everyone could not help but feel dejected.

Jing Shan who was spying behind them came back and reported: "The first enemy soldier has been sighted about five miles behind us and their riding speed is decreasing. This is so infuriating. We have already laid some traps to distract or mislead them but Bai Fei has seen through all of them."

Xiang Shaolong was feeling lost, so he went over to accompany Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi who were applying new medication to Wu Da's wounds. Ji Yanran pulled Xiang Shaolong to one side and advised: "Wu Da's body is burning hot and he is delirious. If we continue to ride non-stop like this, I am afraid he will not be able to make it to the Qin Ridges alive."

With all these problems plaguing him, Xiang Shaolong glanced over to the Qin Ridges again. The magnificent ridges numbering by the hundreds are carved by the wonders of Mother Nature. If they can reach there safely, they can engage the enemy in a series of hit and run attacks as they made their way to meet up with Teng Yi. But in order to hide from their pursuers, they had strayed from their original route. Nobody was actually sure where they were exactly.

Ji Yanran noticed him staring at the Qin Ridges and understood his intentions. She pointed to a unique snow-capped peak and explained: "If I am not wrong, that should be the first peak of the Qin Ridges known as Mount Taibai. As a result, we have gone off course for almost a hundred miles. No wonder we did not see any signs of Second Brother!"

Even under such depressing circumstances, this top beauty can still maintain her cheerful demeanour and excellent disposition. Listening to her assuring words and pleasant voice, Xiang Shaolong calmed down and gathered his fighting spirit. Instructing everyone to take a rest, he pulled Ji Yanran up a small hill and scanned their surroundings.

As the sun slowly set behind the Qin Ridges, thousands of its rays shone across the plains. In the northeast, the enemies were also exhausted and had

stopped chasing. Once in a while, sounds of horses neighing could be heard from their direction.

On their left, a river was flowing from the northwest direction towards the east. Ji Yanran remarked: "I heard that there is a magical fountain on Mount Taibai. The water temperature is high enough to cook food and is known for their healing properties. If we can get there, there will be hope for Wu Da." Xiang Shaolong affirmed: "That is called a hot spring. The water is hot because of the lava beneath a dormant volcano and it carries a large amount of minerals which gives it healing properties."

Ji Yanran was stunned: "What is a dormant volcano and what are minerals?" Xiang Shaolong knew that he had said too much. Hugging her shoulder, he pacified: "I will explain to you later. Our priority now is to escape to the Qin Ridges."

Pointing to the river flowing towards the Qin Ridges, he asked: "If Yanran is Bai Fei and you saw such a river which makes travelling extremely convenient, what would you do?" Ji Yanran's eyes lit up and replied: "I would be afraid that you will build rafts and sail down the river."

Xiang Shaolong asked again: "What will you do about it?" Ji Yanran exclaimed: "I will attack on both fronts. I will send some men to continue chasing on foot and build rafts at the same time. On the rafts, I will give chase down river. If we can sail ahead of you, we can then attack you from the front and the back simultaneously. It will be a hopeless situation for you."

From afar, a group of birds flew up into the air in fear and circled the air for a while. Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Based on Yanran's suggestion to use rafts to escape, we will win a decisive battle tonight." Ji Yanran was astounded: "Do

you really want to build rafts to escape? There are not many trees here and we probably need the whole night to build enough rafts to ferry so many men and horses. By then, the enemies would have attacked us."

Xiang Shaolong's hand snaked down to her tender waist and pinched her playfully. He romantically smiled: "I thought we are telepathically connected? Why can't Talented Lady Ji guess what I am thinking about?" Ji Yanran let out a whine and leapt into his arms. Using all her strength to hug him, she charmingly smiled: "Telepathically connected, this is the most romantic sentence I have ever heard."

However, she did understand that after her beloved husband has spent the last three days running away from their pursuers like a wild animal, he had at least regained his confidence. The attacks have come about too suddenly and he was temporary lost due to his lack of preparation.

But in this life and death situation, Xiang Shaolong finally summoned his fighting spirit. The moon tonight is slighter bigger than the moon three days ago. However, it is still quite dark as there are many clouds blocking the moon in the sky.

The forest is filled with a strong killing aura. Xiang Shaolong and his men are prone on the opposite shore some distance away. All their crossbows are loaded as they waited for the enemy to arrive. The warhorses have been led to another area so as to give them as much rest as possible. When the moon is high above them, frightened birds take to the skies, showing that the enemies are slowly approaching their positions.

By now, their horses are exhausted too and cannot move any more. The

enemies are attacking them on foot. Some sounds can be heard from the river and true enough, ten over rafts flowed down the river. Bai Fei is really attacking them on both fronts. Because of the river separating them from the ground invaders, Xiang Shaolong is not worried about them. Moreover, he faked some woodcutting activity half a mile away from the opposite river bank, misleading the enemy that they are building rafts. The ignorant ground invaders will focus their assault in that direction and by the time they realise that it is a trick, Xiang Shaolong and the others would already have enough time to deal with the enemies on the rafts.

If they had tried to compete with the enemies on raft-building, they will be seriously disadvantaged because of their lesser numbers. It is proven after witnessing the enemies' ability to construct ten over rafts within several hours. Although the enemies numbered more than five hundred, they need everyone to participate in the raft building to achieve such efficiency. The moment the rafts were built, they set off immediately without any rest. In addition, they have just finished riding for three days and three nights, and must be terribly exhausted. Compared to Xiang Shaolong and his men who have had several hours of rest, they are at a disadvantage.

Xiang Shaolong need not say anything as everyone automatically pointed their crossbows at the enemy rafts. From their higher ground, the arrow attack will be much more effective against the invaders below them. There may only be twenty of them but they are situated nearly a hundred feet above the shore. With large rocks and trees protecting them, they are in a state of invincibility.

Human silhouettes can be seen on the rafts. All the attackers are prone down

with the men surrounding the rafts holding up protective shields and the men in the centre of the rafts holding onto bows that were already mounted with arrows. Xiang Shaolong and his men kept quiet and allowed the rafts to sail nearer to them. Five feet, four feet, three feet...

When the first raft has entered a close firing range, two men on both sides took out a long pole and prevented the raft from colliding with the huge rocks along the shore. This stretch of the river is filled with giant rocks and the current is quite strong. That is also the reason Xiang Shaolong chose this part of the river to lay his ambush. In the dense forests on the opposite shore, loud battle cries can be heard and fire torches were being lit, illuminating the forest.

Xiang Shaolong knew that it is time to attack. He pulled the trigger and his arrow sliced through the air. On the first raft, the enemy soldier who is holding onto the long pole gave a tragic cry and fell into the river with the arrow embedded through his body, signaling the beginning of the river battle.

The enemies did not panic but hurriedly raised their shields above their heads and shot their arrows blindly towards both sides of the river. This was exactly what Xiang Shaolong wanted them to do. He did not fire his crossbow anymore but sat back and watched the show.

OH!

Awful sounds filled the air as everyone on the first raft is thrown into the air and eventually landed in the river. Xiang Shaolong had tied a few thick vines

across the river. As the raft is travelling at quite a fast speed, everyone was swept off the raft when they collided into the vines.

The second round of arrows was finally fired. The men on the second raft met with the same fate and were all knocked down into the river, losing their grip over their shields and weapons at the same time. Arrows rained into the river and the river is filled with fresh and blood and tragic cries. The two rafts continue to flow down the river.

The men on the third raft saw that something was amiss and hurriedly rowed to shore. However, the fourth raft behind them could not stop in time and crashed into the third raft, sending more men falling into the river. Those men still on the rafts are stumbling all over one another.

More arrows rained down. The men are simply too tired to defend themselves and were felled by the arrows. The river is not very wide and the two rafts are blocking the majority of the sailing route. Behind them, more than ten rafts crashed into one another in a chain collision. The enemies are in a state of panic and the air is filled with cries of death and pain. Those who are still alive tried their best to run away on shore or swim away in the river.

Another two empty rafts flowed down the river. Xiang Shaolong knew that it is time. He signalled his men and led them away from their ambush area. After running as fast as they can for half a mile, they met up with Wu Guang and Wu De who are waiting for them at the downstream. Wu De happily reported: "We managed to hook four rafts which are sufficient for our own escape."

Everyone boarded the rafts with their horses and sailed down the river gallantly. Zhao Zhi kissed Xiang Shaolong joyously. Ji Yanran sighed: "This trick of borrowing the rafts from the enemy is truly brilliant and credit goes to Hubby. This time, unless Bai Fei can really fly (Fei=fly), there is no way he can catch up to us."

Xiang Shaolong looked up at the star-studded sky and smiled: "Don't forget that they still have another ten odd rafts. Assuming that each raft can hold fifteen men, over a hundred men can still continue to pursue us. Luckily, each one of us is capable of fighting ten men. Let's imagine that they are all expert fighters and each one of us is capable of fighting five of them. Moreover, they are all very tired by now. We shall teach them another lesson at the Qin Ridges. After that, we can all have a good rest and enjoy the scenery of the Qin Ridges. Isn't life wonderful?"

Beside him, all the Guardians were taken aback as they did not expect Xiang Shaolong to continue his revenge plan after just scoring a huge victory. Clenching their fists, they realised that he is right. For the past few days, the enemies have been causing them more troubles than they could have imagined.

In a new twist of thinking, everyone is now hoping for the enemies to give chase. The forests are very dense along the way to the Qin Ridges. A three day's journey is completed in one night.

Early in the morning, they abandoned their rafts and climbed onto shore. After walking some distance away, they settled Wu Da and the horses down in a location and left Zhao Zhi and Wu Guang behind to watch over them. The

rest of the men returned to the shore and loaded their crossbows in anticipation of the arrival of the enemies. Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran are comfortably sitting down together behind a pile of rocks. With their shoulders touching, they could not help but feel a strong sense of love.

Xiang Shaolong saw that Ji Yanran's eyes were shining brightly and asked: "What is my pretty wife thinking about?" Ji Yanran nestled her head on his shoulder and wistfully replied: "I was thinking what if I had insisted on staying single and reclusive? I would still be stuck in Daliang leading a boring life and pining for you every day. That would have been a tragedy." Xiang Shaolong was moved: "I would also suffer for my whole life without you as you are such an important part of me."

Ji Yanran mused: "I don't think so. Men are only concerned about their careers and are fickle minded by nature. You need not pacify me. Xiang Shaolong mocked: "It doesn't help if you continue to think this way. Moreover, every word that I said are my honest feelings. Don't forget that the reward for you was twice for that of mine. Ji Yanran angrily replied, "Di Bi is such a despicable cad. Not only did he want to kill you, he also wanted to insult your wife's modesty. In the future I will settle this score with him."

At this time, a secret bird whistle signal was sounded. The enemy has finally come. It may be due to the fact that several rafts had been damaged in the encounter last night that there were only seven rafts that came into view. There were twenty men on each raft, and the heavy load caused the rafts to be heavily submerged in the water. As a result, the rafts were sailing at a slow speed. The rafts had just made a turn when they crashed straight into the three rafts that Xiang Shaolong had purposely left behind to block their

way. It was a chaotic scene as all the seven rafts piled into one another. Three of the rafts sank immediately and it was a pitiful scene for the enemy. Amidst all the confusion, the enemies jumped into the water and tried to swim towards the shore. Xiang Shaolong issued a single command and from all four directions the guardians who were hiding in ambush began firing their arrows. As Xiang Shaolong had predicted, these invaders had not slept a wink for the past three days and had been working throughout the night. With their low morale compounded by this sudden attack, everyone was only interested in running for their lives and were not interested in defending themselves or putting up a fight. Fresh blood dyed the river red.

Those men on the shore could not avoid the incoming arrows, much less those in the water. In the blink of an eye over thirty men were shot dead while the rest tried to escape by swimming upriver. In all the confusion, no one could tell which of the enemies was Bai Fei. Xiang Shaolong unsheathed Bloodwave and leaped out towards the few lucky enemies who managed to climb up the river shore. It may be due to the fact that the enemy was in awe of Xiang Shaolong's famous name, the moment they saw him, they lost their will to fight and jumped straight back into the water, joining those who were trying to swim upriver. It was a very chaotic scene. The intense battle they expected did not happen at all. Xiang Shaolong restrained the guardians from pursuing the enemies and they left the area. The four days of murderous pursuit had finally come to a conclusion.

## Chapter 07

### Ferocious Wolves of The Remote Mountains

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High in the Qinling mountain range, springs flow into mountain streams and the vegetation is lush. Yet most remarkable is the lake on top of the mountain that prompts one to imagine how countless years ago, as the glaciers receded, the waters collected in the glacial valley to create this miraculous phenomenon. Higher up, the climate turned cold and piercing winds came in waves. The pine trees appeared as if they were floating in a sea of clouds.

Since the party has strayed countless miles from their planned route, they are well and truly lost. Their energy and determination have nonetheless increased since inflicting heavy damage on the enemy. More so, their fear of further pursuit by the enemies' potential reinforcements prompted them to enter the mountains, holding on to the hope that once they've crossed the Qinling range, they would be at the Chu border. They can then decide what to do next at that point.

They climbed and meandered upwards till dusk before setting up camp in a misty valley. Everyone put on their leather coats against the cold, and started getting busy. Some of the guardians cut firewood and started a fire while the rest gathered fodder for the horses. Ji Yanran the two ladies focused on changing Wu Da's dressing. Wu Da awoke to find that he had escaped danger and was moved to tears. The mood of the camp improving greatly.

At this point, Jing Shan and Wu Shu came back with a mountain deer they had hunted, and excitedly reported that they had found a hot spring, adding to everyone's excitement. Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi, without an ounce of restraint, ordered Jing Shan and Wu Guang to pick Wu Da up, and towed Xiang Shaolong towards the largest of the hot springs. Once they exited the valley, an amazing vista appeared before their eyes. Countless peaks faced them while plants bisected the landscape. A stream of steaming hot spring-water flowed from the valley mouth.

They traced the stream upwards and within two hundred steps, they found a large warm pool that was more than five feet wide\* and than ten feet deep. Nestled in the mountains, it looked like the playground of immortals, fascinating and elegant. The spring flowed from a hole in the purplish-black granite, the sight of which caused everyone to relax.

"Ai yo!"

Zhao Zhi, who had been testing the water, suddenly pulled back her hand. She pouted, "It's so hot, how can we bathe in it?" Wu Shu respectfully suggested: "Let your servant get a bucket. We can draw some water and wait for it to cool, after which you can use it."

Ji Yanran dejectedly said: "If we cannot immerse our whole bodies, it will not be as thrilling."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Please do not fret, Talented Lady and Zhi Zhi. We have been going in the wrong direction. This spring will yet bear us fruit if we go downstream. As the water is exposed to the air for a longer period, the

temperature will become more suitable." The two ladies brightened immediately and led the party downstream in search of a better spot.

Five hundred steps downstream, past a few piles of closely spaced rocks, they found a large emerald-green pool that looked like the face of a precious mirror embedded in a stone platform. Surrounded by dense trees, waters deep and clear, temperature lower then before, the two ladies cheered. They went to test the lake water and found that Xiang Shaolong was indeed right, the water was at a temperature suitable for humans. They were almost unable to resist jumping into the water immediately.

Wu Guang the two guardians set Wu Da down immediately. The two ladies took off his jacket and washed his wounds in the warm spring water. Xiang Shaolong noticed that his wounds were seventy to eighty percent healed and let out a sigh of relief: "As long as Little Da's fever recedes, he should be able to recover rapidly."

Wu Da moaned in comfort as his wounds were being washed by the hot water: "The two Madams, your servant feels like immersing himself into the water, is that ok?" Ji Yanran, face turning red, stood up facing Jing Shan the two guardians and said: "Did you hear your brother's request? Quickly come and serve him!" The two young men came immediately and undressed Wu Da. Xiang Shaolong and his wives then moved to the cliff at the far end of the pool. They leisurely sat down to enjoy the majestic mountain scenery.

The spring water flowed down into a thousand feet deep valley that was flanked by two steep cliffs topped by towering pine and cypress trees. The misty mountains against the glow of the setting sun made for an

intoxicatingly beautiful scene. The two ladies speechlessly held on to Xiang Shaolong's two arms. Looking at the scenery, Xiang Shaolong asked: "Is Yanran familiar with Chu's history?"

Ji Yanran flashed him an angry yet charming look, and refused to reply. Xiang Shaolong could not figure out what he had said wrong. Zhao Zhi came to the rescue, saying: "Hubby dares to question sister Yanran's learning? You deserve a beating!"

As Wu Da's moans of comfort floated over in the background, Xiang Shaolong turned his head and found that even Jing Shan and Wu Guang the two guardians had taken off their clothes and jumped into the pool, and were signaling to him their happiness. Speechless, he laughed: "My good wife the Talented Lady Ji, please forgive your hubby's deficient speech. Please, may I ask about Chu's glorious history as well as its present condition?"

Ji Yanran finally turned from anger to happiness, using her clear sweet voice, said: "Chu was indeed strong once, almost conquering all the fertile land in the South." At this point her eyes revealed a look of sadness, perhaps recalling her lost home, since it was a strong Chu that finally annexed her country Yue. Xiang Shaolong bent down and kissed her face, showing his tenderness, said: "The hills are still green, the setting sun is still red, what's gone is gone. Yanran should not think too much."

Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi were both touched. Xiang Shaolong knew he had once again plagiarized the work of latter people and signed bitterly. Ji Yanran said: "The hills are still green, the setting sun is still red. Such deep meaning that it causes one to lament. Who is able to express himself as deeply and as

eloquently as hubby?"

Zhao Zhi is swept by the strong currents of emotion, and gushed: "Hubby sat facing the setting sun and spontaneously composed classic poetry. Zhi Zhi loves you to death!" Xiang Shaolong was ashamed in his heart and diverted the conversation: "Yanran has yet to explain Chu's present situation."

Ji Yanran's beautiful eyes dreamily looked into the distant setting sun, speaking as if she was sleep-talking, said: "During the final years of King Huai of Chu, Qin used Shang Yang's political reforms to strengthen itself and, using the policy of conquest with the Horizontal Alliance (clique of the School of Diplomacy during the Warring States Period), was successful for a season. Chu's Vertical Alliance to resist Qin proved a failure. Dan Yang and Lan Tian counties were both defeated by Qin. The greatest set-back was the ceding of six hundred miles of land near the two cities Han Zhong and Shang Yu. Wei also took the opportunity to attack Chu's neighboring country Zheng. It was not until Chu transformed their national policies that they began to have some victories amidst the losses. Is hubby interested in the details?"

Ji Yanran's exposition was clear and concise. Even though Xiang Shaolong did not know where Dan Yang, Lan Tian, Han Zhong and Shang Yu were, he could make a guess. Nodding his head, Shaolong said: "Since those three kids are not going to leave the pool so quickly, we should chat a bit more."

Zhao Zhi did not know that Wu Guang and Jing Shan were both naked in the water, couldn't help but looked over and turned her head back immediately with a blush. Xiang Shaolong secretly mused that if it was Zhao Ya or Shan Rou, they would not have been so shy and might even have joked about it. As

he thought about the two women, he could not help feeling aroused.

Ji Yanran continued: "Once King Huai of Chu was tricked into coming to Qin and died of deprivation, Chu became even more of a failure. When King Qing Xiang ascended the throne, he no longer had the strength to expand towards the Northeast. He expanded into the Southwest instead, sending the Great General Zhuang along the Yuan river into Yunnan, out of Qie Lan and overcoming Ye Lang, creating a series of vassal states that abided by Chu's rule. Leveraging Yunnan's resources, Chu continued to push towards the Southwest, occupying large tracts of land from Ba and Shu countries, dominating territory on both sides of the river."

Only now does Xiang Shaolong begin to understand why the people of Chu continuously advance and retreat again when defending against Qin in Zhu - simply because they were too occupied to worry about the North.

Zhao Zhi asked curiously: "This should be a good thing for the people of Chu, why does sister Yanran think that this is both a boon and a bane?"

Ji Yanran replied: "It's definitely a good thing for a country to increase its territory, but this requires a large powerful military to establish and maintain. The people of Chu have been compelled by the people of Qin to shift their capital three times. After losing Wu and Qian counties to Qin, the lords of the prominent families in Chu took the opportunity to advance themselves as king. Yunnan, Ye Lang, Min Shan and Qie Lan provinces awaited the outcome and disregarded the capital. Although King Qing Xiang once counter-attacked Qin, wrestling back fifteen villages by the river as if it was a county, Chu remained under the constant battery of Qin. That is why today King Xiao Lie

has to hand over the Na province to Qin in order to sue for peace. Because of this, they had to cede half their territory and to move their capital Southeast to Ju Yang. After that, though they managed to exterminate the country of Lu, they continued to lose every time they were matched against Qin's troops. With Qin's influence continuously increasing, Chu had to move the capital Southeast yet again, this time towards Shou Chun, the territory West of Qing Yang falling into the palm of great Qin. Now they can only wait at death's door like a dog panting its last breath. That is why whenever Li Yuan talks to me about his plans to revive Chu, I can't even accept half a sentence he says."

Zhao Zhi said: "Li Yuan is so muddle-headed that he didn't realize that sister Yanran dislikes the Chu people most of all."

Ji Yanran replied: "You can't really say that either. Although there is some regret for the loss of my country, large countries have been swallowing smaller ones for the past few hundred years. No matter how the conquered countries argue against it, Chu is able to rise to the top because of its size, unifying more than half of the Southeastern territories. It has also had the most profound and long lasting influence on the civilizations in the central plains, especially after absorbing my country Yue, when its influence extended to the lower reaches of the Huai river, Si and the South China Sea."

She stopped for a while, then continued: "There isn't a country in the central plains whose culture is more colorful and beautiful than Chu's, the main reason being that after annexing a few tens of countries and tribes, all the different cultures have been mixed together through inter-marriage. However, this presents a problem politically. Even though Chu has the largest

territory and influence amongst the nations, King Xiao Lie is oftentimes unable to do as he pleases. Chu may seem to have revived and demonstrated resistance to Qin, but this belies unspeakable difficulties."

This really shows that an evening of conversation with his beloved is better than ten years of study. Xiang Shaolong's understanding has now extended to the whole of the presently nonexistent China. Thinking that the future Qin Shihuang whom Xiao Pan becomes will unify so many different countries, cultures, ethnic groups and talents under his banner, moving the distant heavens and broad earth, and thinking that he himself created this Qin Shihuang, Xiang Shaolong began to have an on-top-of-the-world feeling.

Amidst the sound of whistling, the three guardians including Wu Da had stopped bathing and were lighting a fire for them to replace the light from the fading twilight. The two ladies jumped up happily. Wu Da looked like someone born again, with a radiant glowing face, able to leave with just a supporting arm. This caused Xiang Shaolong to click his tongue in surprise. The hot spring now belonged to Xiang Shaolong and his wives. Looking at the two ladies remove their coats and open their belts, Xiang Shaolong became aroused, following them into the steamy water.

Climbing high and going low, uphill and downhill.

After walking in the Qinling Range for five days, everyone finally realized that they were lost. Even though the Qinling Range presented a majestic and mysterious mountain scene, they had lost the desire to enjoy themselves. This was especially so with wild wolves howling near and far, as if they were

continuously spying on the party, causing them to sleep uneasily. The only good news was Wu Da's gradual recovery such that he was able to move on his own, greatly reducing everyone's physical and psychological burden.

Xiang Shaolong has a lot of experience in route marching and is able to navigate using the sun, moon and stars. Heading Southeast, he calmed down a little, knowing that the day they crossed the Qinling Mountains, they would be somewhere on the Chu border. Over the next two days, after losing another two warhorses to the ravines, the terrain began to slope downwards with the climate getting warmer. They can no longer see the soul freezing ancient glacier. The treetops were now also free of snow, improving everyone's mood.

That night, they set up camp on a tableland beside a mountain. After dinner, everyone except the assigned sentries hid in their tents. With no incidents on the mountain, Xiang Shaolong relaxed and took to the two ladies like fish to water, feeling not the least bit lonesome. While Ji Yanyan is romantic and passionate when alone with Xiang Shaolong, she is very aloof in front of his other wives and maids, much less when living in the same room. Nonetheless, under the exceptional circumstances, and also because she had grown closer to Zhao Zhi, she released herself to enjoy the proximity of being wrapped in a tent, treating Xiang Shaolong to amorous pleasures.

While they were about to sleep in each other's arms, Zhao Zhi remarked: "Why is the wolf pack howling especially ferociously tonight?"

Xiang Shaolong turned his ear and listened carefully, realizing that the wolves' howling was concentrated below the slope to the South. While this

raised his curiosity, leaving the warm sleeping pad and the touch of his beautiful wives and the tent was too much to ask. Laughing, he replied: "Maybe its because they know that the two smoothest, most tender-fleshed and tasty women hidden here are about to leave them, so they decided to organize a sending-off party!" The two ladies took the opportunity to be petulant and bunched up with him, putting up all kinds of x-rated scenes.

While they were at their busiest, a human shout was heard amidst the wolves' howls, causing a burst of frantic movement. Xiang Shaolong jumped up and hurriedly rushed out while urging both ladies to remain in the tent. The two ladies wanted to follow, but regretted they were powerless and hence remained obediently. As Xiang Shaolong threw himself out of the tent, all the men had also emerged from their tents. Xiang Shaolong instructed all except five men to remain guarding the camp. Clutching a torch, together with his five most capable men, Jing Shan, Jing Qi, Wu Guang, Wu Yan and Wu Shu, he rushed towards the sound of the of the human voice.

After climbing over a mountain top, everyone readied their crossbows and went down the long slope together. The wretched bugle of the howling wolves became clearer, indicating that the wolf pack was about to attack their target. They had not reached the bottom of the three hundred feet long slope when ten over wolves caught their scent and rushed over. Rushing at full speed, it seemed as if more than ten sets of electric bulbs were coming at them. The ghastly sets of white teeth and flaming green eyes horrified them. Six crossbow bolts were released. Six of the wild wolves were hit and fell into the valley at the bottom of the slope with a miserable hiss. The remaining ten odd wolves fearlessly rushed them. There wasn't enough time to reload the crossbows. Everyone drew their swords and dashed headlong into the wolf

pack.

Fresh blood splashed and the wild wolves cried miserably. The wild wolves were extremely quick-witted. Thankfully all six men were highly talented, occupying strategic locations. They still found it hard to cope nonetheless. Xiang Shaolong had just cleaved one of the wild wolves when another wolf followed by jumping up, aiming to bite his throat. Xiang Shaolong let out roar and kicked out his right leg towards the pit of the vicious wolf's stomach. The alert wolf responded by lowering its head and biting his boot. Thankfully, his sword was able to circle to the wolf's eyes, prompting the wolf to hiss and retreat. However, there were two fresh tooth marks on his boot, showing the sharpness of the wolf's teeth.

Jing Shan and Jing Qi were both accustomed to hunting and understood the situation best. They were not only fearless, but rushed forward with a shout, slashing with their swords and kicking with their legs. They used their superior ground to press their advantage while brandishing their torches, forcing the newly arrived wolves back. With an exclamation, Wu Guang was pushed to the ground by a wolf that rushed him from the side. This youngster who has always believed himself to be strong unleashed his aggression and threw the entire wolf down the slope into a pile of rocks. His sleeves were nonetheless ripped open and fresh blood flowed down. By the time Xiang Shaolong kicked away another wolf that was attacking Wu Guang, more than ten wolves had been killed, wounded or driven away. Taking a look around, he found that aside from Jing Shan, all the rest had been injured with bites or claw marks. He couldn't help but be shocked at the ferocity and heroism of the wolves.

As the howl of the wolves had decreased noticeably, they heard a faint whoop from the bottom of the slope. Everyone was surprised at running into another human being in such a deep and remote mountain range. Their curiosity and sympathy aroused, they disregarded the violent wolves, formed up their ranks, loaded their crossbows and rushed downhill. The terrain at the bottom of the slope was flat and level, surrounded by mountains. Close to a hundred hungry wolves had gathered at the Eastern end, endlessly rushing up the rocky slope.

At the top of the slope was a nearly extinguished fire. They could only hear the sound of voices in the shadow of the fire, but could not see any of the people. The hungry wolves, seeing a rush of people approaching, spread out in caution. Those that rushed over were all shot by the crossbows. This time the party had learned its lesson. Half the men kept the wolves at bay with the torches while the other half continuously loaded and fired their crossbows. The hungry wolves dropped one by one.

When Jing Shan and Jing Qi reached the short rocky slope, the wolf pack had already dispersed into the distance, not daring to approach again. Nonetheless, Jing Shan and the rest's killing spirit had been aroused and they continued to pursue and shoot down the wolves, giving vent to their earlier resentment. Xiang Shaolong knew that the wolf pack was now afraid, and so let down his guard. Facing upwards, he shouted: "Who is the friend up there? Is anyone injured?"

One person appeared at the top of the slope, fist in palm, replying: "Many thanks to all the heroes' assistance and kindness. Three of us have been bitten by the wolves, but we are not in any danger. As long as we can gather

dry wood to keep our fire burning, we can survive till dawn."

Xiang Shaolong perceived that his speech was formal and proper, yet appeared to be evasive and cautious, hence he did not request to be allowed to go up for a meeting. Thinking that this was nothing unusual, he loudly shouted: "Since this is the case, we will chase the wolves away. Elder brother may come down and fell some trees to keep the fire going." He then paid his compliments and proceeded to pursue the wolf pack.

## Chapter 08

### Joining Company and Journeying Together

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As the morning broke the next day, the two ladies rose early and emerged from the tent.

Xiang Shaolong was exhausted from the hard work of killing and repelling wolves all night, so he slept until noon before crawling out of bed.

While he was still washing his face and combing his hair, a guest arrived.

This person had a dignified face and large ears, appearing formidable. He was dressed in a warrior's outfit, displaying outstanding skill that must have been the result of a lifetime's training. His left arm was bound up, evidence of the last night's battle with the wolves.

When he found out that Xiang Shaolong was the leader, the man hurried forward and said: "Your humble servant is Zhuang Kong, what is the hero's honourable name? I was criticized by my Madam for not asking after benefactor's name last night. I have come to apologize humbly this morning."

Xiang Shaolong saw that, as before, he still hadn't revealed his status and origins, but at least he now knew there were womenfolk in his company. He was astounded, and said: "Elder brother, since you do not wish to reveal your status and origins, why come up to ask after ours? Why don't we treat each other as strangers who met by chance, and go our separate ways?"

Zhuang Kong did not expect Xiang Shaolong to be so direct as to point out the deliberate concealment of his origins and felt embarrassed. He was nonetheless an extraordinary person also, and shamefully said: "Benefactor is right to rebuke me. Regretfully I am under strict orders from my Madam not to freely reveal her identity. However, since I have met benefactor, I am delighted. Would benefactor be willing to allow your humble servant to ask Madam for instructions? I will see benefactor again."

At this point Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi emerged from the forest hand in hand and returned to the camp. Zhuang Kong stared at them in a daze, obviously not believing that he would get to see such unmatched beauties in such a place.

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "This matter can be avoided. We have pressing matters at hand and need to leave immediately. Lets leave it at that! Here's wishing brother Zhuang and your Madam a smooth journey."

Zhuang Kong was shocked, withdrew his gaze and earnestly asked: "Is benefactor going through the Chu border?"

Ji Yanran the two ladies saw Shaolong talking to him and could guess what was happening. They stood to one side and listened attentively.

Xiang Shaolong stared blankly: "Isn't this the route to Han Zhong county? It should still be Qin's territory."

Zhuang Kong was startled and pointed out: "I'm afraid benefactor has lost his way. These are the spines of the Qinling mountain range. To reach Han Zhong

and Nan Yang counties, you need to skirt Chu's border for five days even if you have the correct directions. Your humble servant has traversed the route twice and am definitely not mistaken."

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help cursing Du Bi in his heart. He would have caught up to Teng Yi ten days ago if he had not been compelled by Du Bi's men to abandon his route. He has instead ended up in this accursed place. Thinking about the hard journey behind, he did not have the courage to turn back. He had better continue towards the Chu border before thinking about how to meet up with Teng Yi.

He signed: "Are you guys going towards Chu too?"

Zhuang Kong replied: "Indeed so. If hero does not mind, let us join company and journey together. It is good to have people to talk to along the way."

Xiang Shaolong guessed that the other party must have been frightened by the pack of wolves the night before. After muttering to himself for a while, he asked: "How big is your party?"

Zhuang Kong replied: "Aside from the Madam, there are five women and one child, and including your humble servant, fifteen servants."

Xiang Shaolong thought about all the wrong turns and wasted miles he would have had to walk if he did not have Zhuang Kong as a guide. He also figured that if they parted ways immediately after leaving the Qinling mountains, his party would not be overly burdened. He finally nodded his head in agreement.

Zhuang Kong was so happy that he forgot all about asking for Xiang Shaolong's identity and origins. They arranged to meet at the bottom of the slope in a short while. Zhuang Kong then hurried away.

Ji Yanran smiled and drew near, saying: "From this guy's style of clothing and accent, we can be sure that he is a Chu nobleman. Hubby had better be careful."

Xiang Shaolong said: "For the time being, I shall be known as Xiang Ran. You will be my first wife and Zhi Zhi will be the second. This trip to Chu is for business. Even if they do not believe us, it will be difficult for them to discern the truth."

By the time Xiang Shaolong's party had de-camped and led the horses down the hill, Zhuang Kong's group of fifteen men, five women and one child had already assembled and were waiting respectfully. There were a few wounded amongst the fifteen servants, two of whom had wolf claw marks on their necks and faces, causing trepidation to onlookers.

On inspection, besides Zhuang Kong, there were at most two others who could barely be classified as experts.

Most of the women were wearing cloaks and had their faces covered with muslin veils. Even though one could see a vague outline of their faces, it was indistinct.

The two women who did not cover their faces were as thick and solid as bulls, and while they could not be regarded as ugly, were exceedingly plain.

The other three women all had graceful postures, and one could tell that they were noblewomen from a single glance. Under the semi-transparent muslin, they exuded a sort of hazy and mysterious yet beautiful charm.

One of the women was especially tall. She also appeared to be the eldest, aging just above thirty. From appearances, she had to be Zhuang Kong's Madam.

The child, on the other hand, had pretty delicate features and a pair of spirited eyes. He looked like he was between eleven and twelve years old. On meeting Xiang Shaolong and his party, he opened his curious eyes and sized them up.

The five women bowed on seeing them, their eyes falling on Ji Yanran. The Madam spoke first, saying: "Your servant's husband is named Zhuang. Your servant will not forget hero's assistance and benevolence last night even when old, but does not yet know the hero's honorable name. Please enlighten so that your servant can engrave it in the heart and mind."

Xiang Shaolong arrived in front of her and returned the courtesy. He laughed, saying: "My humble self is named Xiang Ran. These two are my wives. I'm on this trip to try my luck in Chu. Looking to see if I can obtain some high quality gold. Didn't think that we would lose our way. However if we did not lose our way, we would not have met Madam and your noble family. Is this little boy your esteemed son?"

Madam Zhuang scrutinized Xiang Shaolong from behind her veil, saying: "Indeed he is my son Zhuang Bao Yi. The other two ladies are your servant's

third and fourth younger sisters You Cui and You Ning. The rest are my family servants."

The other two ladies shyly rose as one.

Madam Zhuang's gaze fell on Ji Yanran's face, seeming to think of something, but kept the thoughts hidden, merely saying: "It's hard to believe that the wild wolves around the mountain are so heroic and unafraid of people. We had prepared defenses but almost had a calamitous brush with the wolves. It was fortunate that hero relieved the siege. Now that hero is traveling with us, we are very much relieved."

Xiang Shaolong noticed the time of the day, smiled and said: "We woke up late today. We should set off immediately!"

As Madam Zhuang nodded her head, Zhuang Kong hurriedly ordered horses to be brought forward and helped Madam Zhuang, her sisters and her son to get mounted. Even though he was still young, this Zhuang Bao Yi was as stable as Mount Taishan on horseback, without any fear.

Everyone then started to descend the mountain.

Zhuang Kong was indeed not bragging. He really knew the route well, saving Xiang Shaolong's party much time and effort. Nonetheless the three ladies and child required guides to lead their horses, hence they progressed slowly. This was unavoidable after all.

The two parties did not make conversation on the road. Only that Zhuang

Kong kept pointing out the directions and the landmarks en-route, causing Xiang Shaolong to have the pleasurable feeling of being in a tour group.

When they en-camped at night, Madam Zhuang's party retreated to their tents to eat their dinner, presenting even less of a chance for conversation.

They proceeded like this for five days, until they set eyes on the Chu border.

That night, they en-camped to rest as usual. Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran his two wives together with the guardians surrounded the campfire roasting the hunted game and engaging in cheerful banter.

Zhuang Kong and his party stayed at the other end of the camp eating their dry rations, having declined Xiang Shaolong's courtesy invitation.

The full moon in the middle of the sky cast a golden hue on the surrounding mountainous landscape. The snowy peaks in the distance shimmered mysteriously.

In time they heard the howl of the wolves, and couldn't help but feel that the tranquil and placid mountain and fields were nonetheless surrounded by danger. To lighten her husband's burden, Zhao Zhi pointed out: "After we cross two more mountains, we will step into the plains. Isn't it exciting? I wished it was morning already."

Ji Yanran sidled up to Xiang Shaolong and softly said: "The other party is nervous."

Xiang Shaolong looked over to Zhuang Kong's party. Sure enough, while they remained silent, they were a little fidgety. He nodded his head in agreement, but could't think of anything else to say.

Since the other party already refused to divulge anything, it was useless to ask. Moreover, once they reached the Chu border, they would be too busy with their own business to worry about somebody else's.

At this point, a burst of howling appeared nearby. Wu Guang turned to Jing Shan and laughed, saying: "Your old friends are here again. Do not be merciful when you execute, if not they will use their teeth to be intimate with you."

Jing Qi's expression darkened, saying: "I think the wolf pack is here for revenge."

Jing Shan also frowned silently.

Wu Yan was puzzled, asking: "Do you really think that wolves are like humans, able to hold grudges?"

Jing Qi replied: "There is nothing fantastic about this. Horses have their nature, recognizing their masters. Wolves have their nature, knowing their enemies. Whats so strange about this?"

Zhao Zhi is the least courageous, and worriedly said: "In that case you guys should quickly think of a way to deal with them."

Xiang Shaolong is also alarmed because even though they have camped on a platform beside a cliff, the other three sides were slopes with dense trees. If a few tens or a few hundreds of the wolves were to break through, it would be no laughing matter. If only he had a heavy machine gun! Wu Shu, who was the wisest and most cool-headed of the guardians, smiled saying: "We do not dare to disobey second Madam's command. Could we nonetheless fill our stomachs to regain our energy before going to work?"

Zhao Zhi pouted and complained to Xiang Shaolong: "Wu Shu this little kid is trying to play punk with moi. Zhi Zhi never said that he could not eat."

Xiang Shaolong laughed out loud saying: "That sheep's leg is going to be burnt soon, quickly take it down and put it on the plate. As long as my two wives have something to eat, all will be forgiven."

Ji Yanran playfully said: "Is Zhi Zhi a glutton? You have maligned her so. I want to seek justice on her behalf."

They passed the time like that.

After dinner, Jing Shan and the rest went to deploy animal traps in good spirits, seeming only to fear that the wolves would not come, causing everyone to be happy and in good humor.

Ji Yanran the two ladies also joined in the fun. Ironically, it was Xiang Shaolong who managed to steal some free time. He sat in front of the fire staring blankly and lost in thought. Past events and the future, likes and dislikes all flitted through his mind.

At this moment, Madam Zhuang opened her tent, came out and sauntered towards Xiang Shaolong. She was dressed in a plain white jacket, a white cloak and a hat with an inlaid pearl. With her veil down, she looked like a beautiful spirit from the netherworld.

Xiang Shaolong was a little startled and continued gazing at her. Only when she arrived at his side, greeted him and sat down did he open his mouth to ask: "Is Madam Zhuang unable to sleep?"

Since she was close enough for him to smell her breath and since she was under the glare of the fire, the veil was no longer effective. He saw that the silhouette of her face was elegant, graceful and beautiful. Though her beauty was not as soul shaking as Qin Qing's, she was a still rare beauty.

Her bright and intelligent eyes, reflecting the bright and flickering bonfire, gazed at Xiang Shaolong. She suddenly sighed faintly: "My heart is troubled so how can I fall asleep?"

After all this while, this is the first time that Xiang Shaolong has talked to her up close. It was a new sensation for him. He nodded and said: "Madam does not need to reveal her matters to my humble self."

Madam Zhuang noticed that he was looking at her face intently and softly asked: "Is hero able to see your servant's appearance?"

Xiang Shaolong was slightly embarrassed and said: "At this angle and under the light, I can more or less see a little."

In his heart, he felt that these words carried a hint of romance intent. Was she trying to seduce him to do something for her?

This Madam Zhuang reminded him of Lady Pingyuan and Empress Jing in that they were all mature and older beauties. They were no longer as pure as young maidens but were instead extremely practical. They knew how to use themselves and their beauty to accomplish their objectives.

Madam Zhuang lowered her head and continued saying: "Is hero really on this trip to Chu to look for gold?"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to be so perceptive and direct. He did not dare hesitate, and replied: "Men die for wealth, birds die for food. If not for gold, why would I weary myself with the long and difficult journey?"

Madam Zhuang pondered these two wise sentences "men die for wealth, birds die for food" silently for a good while before raising her head again to say: "Hero Xiang's words are poetic and meaningful. Definitely an extraordinary man. Moreover, your two elegant and beautiful wives are second to none, and not one person in your household is not an expert. Should I believe that you are bustling all over for something as trivial as wealth?"

Xiang Shaolong refused to admit it, replied: "How can gold be a trivial matter? Madam must be joking."

From behind her veil, Madam Zhuang stared at him without blinking and said unhurriedly: "Since this is the case, as long as Hero Xiang escorts us to

Yunnan, I will thank hero with one thousand teals of gold. Your servant is prepared to swear a fell oath, and will definitely keep her word."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked, recalling Ji Yanran's discourse about how Chu was thwarted in its Eastern invasion and was compelled to expand Southwestwards. The protagonist was one Great General Zhuang, who shared the same family name as Madam Zhuang's husband.

Later when Chu's power waned, that Zhuang together with the vassal states attempted to take over the throne. Could it be that that Zhuang was the king of Yunnan?

After recovering from his shock, he said unenthusiastically: "Is Madam related to the king of Yunnan in some way?"

Madam Zhuang softly replied: "The former king is my father-in-law."

Xiang Shaolong figured that this was another fight for the throne, and another royal tragedy. He lost the mood to listen further. He gasped: "Madam's suggestion is indeed tempting, but this thousand teals of gold is too difficult to earn. Moreover, I am not willing to endanger my two lovely wives who are only on this trifor sightseeing. Please forgive me, for the heart is willing but the body is weak."

Madam Zhuang also signed, and gently said: "Xiang Shaolong has the backing of the Wu family, how can he be interested in a thousand teals of gold?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly: "So you already knew who I was, yet toyed

with me deliberately."

Madam Zhuang giggled: "A person of your appearance and body shape cannot be found amongst ten thousand men. The Talented Lady Ji is even more difficult to pass off. You are both so famous all over, your servant finds it strange that Mister Xiang thought he could fool all of us."

Again she smiled and said: "If you were some common man, your servant might have used her body to buy your favour, but I know that this would not be effective on you. Why don't we openly strike a mutually profitable deal instead?"

Xiang Shaolong had an uneasy feeling. This Madam Zhuang did not only have Lady Pingyuan and Empress Jing's qualities, she also had Zhao Ya's smartness that was not afraid of opposition, causing him to be provoked.

He took a deep breath, collected his mind, and said: "Honestly, I do not know what you can use to trade with me."

Madam Zhuang had a card up her sleeves, said: "This trip to Chu, is Mister Xiang after Li Yuan or Tian Dan? If its the latter, I do not fear that you will refuse to deal with me."

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily stunned and tongue-tied. He knew that although many people knew about his plan to attack Tian Dan, it was limited to a small circle of people in the royal family and the military in Xianyang. How did this Madam Zhuang know this secret?

Madam Zhuang softly said: "If Mister Xiang knew that Lady Huayang is my aunt, he would not be so surprised."

Xiang Shaolong took a deep breath and said: "Did Madam come from Xianyang?"

Madam Zhuang refused to answer, and said: "Could Mister please tell me whether this trip is due to Tian Dan. If the answer is not, then your servant does not have the necessary means to do business with Mister. It would then be best to drop this matter."

Xiang Shaolong tried to discern with his heart. Her tone seemed to suggest that she knew something about Tian Dan. He could not help being startled, gasping: "Madam is formidable. Please continue your discourse."

Madam Zhuang happily said: "Your servant trusts that Mister is an upright nobleman. Once he knows your servant's secret, even if he does not accept the deal, he would not reveal the secret. Is this the case?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "Don't tell me that I, Xiang Shaolong, will harm you women and children?"

Madam Zhuang's spirit was roused: "The reason I know so many secrets is all because I have an agent amongst Li Yuan's confidantes. Mister should understand now!"

Xiang Shalong suddenly realized that Madam Zhuang was herself from Chu, was also Zhuang's daughter-in-law and what's more was Lady Huayang's close

relative. For one of the spies from her intelligence system to infiltrate Li Yuan's confidantes was not unreasonable. No wonder she knew that he wanted to deal with Tian Dan.

Madam Zhuang smiled: "Could Mister Xiang lift your servant's veil? Your servant wants to tell you an unfathomable secret face to face."

Xiang Shaolong frowned and said: "Madam belongs to another man, I am afraid that it would be improper for me to do so."

Madam Zhuang sadly said: "My late husband has already been beheaded by the rebel army in the chaos five years ago. Your servant does not belong to anyone presently. Why else would I flee my home village and go to Qin? If not for Lady Huayang's protection, your servant would have been captured by the Chu people long ago."

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh and lifted her veil. A face that was half happy and half angry, and filled with the charm of a mature beauty appeared before him.

Her jade-like face was a little too long, but matched perfectly with her slender and graceful swan-like neck, producing a uniquely attractive charm.

In addition she had a cute little mole on her lower jaw that balanced the whole package to perfection.

Her eyes were indeed bright and intelligent, causing men's hearts to race.

Even though she did not have Qin Qing's classical beauty, she had the audacity and wild nature that Qin Qing lacked, causing men to want to bed her impulsively.

No wonder she needed to veil her face.

Madam Zhuang saw him sizing her up unabashedly and was pleased, drawing back her shyness, said: "Mister thinks that your servant's appearance is pleasing!"

Xiang Shaolong mentally put on his guard. While she insisted from the beginning that she had no intention of seducing him, she was actually doing so. Yet it was difficult to fault her. For a frail woman like her to return to her home country to help her son ascend the throne, besides relying on the gifts that heaven has bestowed on her, what else could she rely on?

One could image from the time she left her country till today how many times she had used her beautiful body to barter for help from men.

He couldn't help but sigh again: "Madam does not need to lower herself. You have not yet revealed the big secret!"

A look of amazement flitted across Madam Zhuang's eyes. She softly said: "Only till now do I understand why even the Widow Qing finds it difficult to restrain herself with Mister. A person's words reveals his inner cultivation. From Mister's restrained words, I can tell that Mister is extraordinary."

Xiang Shaolong silently admitted his shame, forced a bitter laugh and said:

"Returning to one's country is a serious matter, Madam had better not fall for me. You might cause trouble to yourself."

Madam Zhuang covered her mouth in an enchanting smile, saying: "You have confidence in yourself. Why should you be afraid of other people's admiration? Even to the point of warning us off, ai! Nobody will believe that in this world there really exists a man like you who is afraid of women's affections."

The more Xiang Shaolong interacts with this Madam Zhuang, the more he is enticed by her. At this moment, he realized that Zhuang Kong and his party had gone to the slopes to help out, leaving the two of them single man and woman alone at the space outside the tents. Secretly alarmed, he turned serious and said: "Your servant is listening intently."

Madam Zhuang restrained her smile and softly said: "Tian Dan has already returned to the Chu capital Shou Chun."

Xiang Shaolong shook uncontrollably: "What?"

Madam Zhuang leisurely explained: "As Tian Dan has enemies everywhere both inside and outside of Chu, he has an identical stand-in that follows him everywhere. Once he realized that you were not willing to let him go, he hid himself amongst Li Yuan's troops and departed. The person you saw thereafter was his stand-in!"

Xiang Shaolong was covered in cold sweat. No wonder Tian Dan kept such a low profile during the hunt and tried his best to avoid attending the public

events. To think this was the reason.

He knew he was short by one move in this game of chess and could not defeat the old fox.

He needed to notify Teng Yi and Xu Yi Luan immediately to prevent them from being wiped out by a Chu counter-attack.

Once he thought about this, he lost the mood for anything else. He has now failed completely and needs to write his name backwards.

Suddenly Madam Zhuang's face seemed to get bigger. While he was still in a daze, Madam Zhuang approached and kissed him lightly on the lips before sitting back, saying: "As long as you help me return to my country, I will help you kill Tian Dan."

Xiang Shaolong woodenly said: "You are powerless to defend yourself, how can you help me?"

Madam Zhuang solemnly said: "This villain Li Ling is able to murder his master and betray his country only because of King Xiao Lie's support in the background. Now that King Xiao Lie is dead, there are many people in Shou Chun and Yunnan who support us. Circumstances have changed entirely. If not how would I dare to return to Chu?"

Xiang Shaolong recovered from his shock and said: "Did you also obtain the news of King Xiao Lie's death from Li Yuan?"

Madam Zhuang replied: "Of course not. Our family's roots in Chu are deep. Zhuang Kong came to us from the faraway Chu precisely to inform us and to bring us back."

Xiang Shaolong almost lost his voice, said: "What? King Xiao Lie is really dead?"

Madam Zhuang looked at him uncomprehendingly.

Xiang Shaolong could not stop shuddering. It was hard to believe that his scheme had accidentally helped Li Yuan rush back in time to seize power. Otherwise Li Yuan would still be in Xianyang.

This matter was so strange as to exceed everyone's expectations.

After taking a deep breath, he said with resolve: "If I can kill Tian Dan, I will use all my strength to help your son take hold of the throne."

## Chapter 09

### Setting Sail on The River Huai

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All their original plans have turned out to be based on wishful thinking and have been messed up.

The wolves never came that night. After some discussion, Ji Yanran also figured that Madam Zhuang should not be lying. This was because Tian Dan's performance during the hunt really was abnormal. Besides, with Tian Dan's farsighted thinking, he would not have surrendered the initiative so passively that he required Lu Buwei's protection.

In the grand scheme of things, Tian Dan would not have believed that Lu Buwei could kill Xiang Shaolong, although Lu Buwei was almost successful.

That is why Dan Chu's returning troops would have made the necessary arrangements to support him, even counter-attacking by laying traps for any tailing enemies. It was nonetheless unlikely that they knew of the existence of Xu Yiluan's troops in waiting in ambush.

Finally, Xiang Shaolong decided to dispatch two guardians, the recently recovered Wu Da and Dan Quan (from Pu Bu and Liu Chao's unit), to use fast horses to intercept Teng Yi. They were to advise Teng Yi to change his whole battle plan into delaying Tian Dan's troops but not attacking.

This will delay Tian Dan's return to Qi, giving them more opportunities to kill

him.

As the Liu Shi brothers and Dan Chu are not at Tian Dan's side, Tian Dan's defensive web is now at its weakest.

Early the next morning, before they de-camped, Madam Zhuang led her two sisters over to discuss the details of Shouchun City.

They had all removed their veils. You Cui and You Ning turned out to be outstandingly beautiful sisters, but they were still half a step below the uniquely charming Madam Zhuang.

Madam Zhuang smiled and said: "They are indeed my younger sisters, just that they are not my blood sisters but belong to the Zhuang family."

She then warmly greeted Ji Yanran the two women and expressed her admiration before turning back to the main topic, mentioning: "Li Yuan has no lack of underlings who recognize Mister Xiang. The Talented Lady Ji is an even more reknown personality in Shouchun. Therefore we need to rely on some disguises to fool the Chu people."

Xiang Shaolong caressed his cheek and jaw, saying: "I can grow a full beard and restrict my movements to the night. That way I can avoid the eyes and ears of people."

Madam Zhuang said: "Avoiding people is not difficult. The problem is that if we cannot move about freely, it will be even harder to find an opportunity to kill Tian Dan. Fortunately these two sisters of mine are most familiar with the

techniques to change appearances. They can play some tricks with Mister Xiang's face. Unless you come face to face with familiar people, you should be able to deceive anyone."

Ji Yanran said: "What identity should he use when meeting people?"

Madam Zhuang said: "You can act as my brother Wan Ruiguang. Because he was seriously injured during the mutiny, he escaped out of Chu's borders, but never recovered and passed away three months ago. There should not be anyone in Shouchun who recognizes him."

While she spoke normally, everyone could detect an unappeasable hatred and enmity in her voice.

Zhao Zhi sorrowfully pointed out: "As Madam returns to Yunnan to deal with the enemy, how confident is she?"

Madam Zhuang replied nonchalantly: "Originally I did not have half a hope. But since I had my back to the wall, I had no choice but to take advantage of Chu's period of weakness and return with my son to fight a life and death battle with the thief; but now that I have Xiang Shaolong, I have every confidence of success."

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "Madam thinks too highly of me."

Madam Zhuang smiled and said: "You'd better start addressing me as your elder sister from now on and I will address you as Ruiguang. It is still another month's journey from here to Shouchun. I will describe Ruiguang's bitter life

story to you in detail. Thankfully Ruiguang is famous in the Northwest as a heroic general. He's always had a formidable reputation. It is most appropriate for you to pass off as him. Because we are originally from Yunnan, we do not speak with the Chu accent. As long as you study diligently, we should be able to fool the Chu people."

Xiang Shaolong mused that the last time he disguised himself as Dong Horse Fanatic, while this time he is playing the heroic general Wan Ruiguang. It would be so thrilling if he could fool Tian Dan again.

Ji Yanran, being the most attentive to detail, asked: "What identity is Madam Zhuang using to enter the Chu capital this time?"

Madam Zhuang said: "I have a good friend in Lord Chunshen's house by the name of Weng. In those days, as King Xiaolie feared our Yunnan's growth to become the hegemon of the Southeast, he forced Li Ling to conspire with the Ye Lang people to overthrow the Zhuang family. In one night, close to ten thousands of the Zhuang clan was murdered. Lord Chunshen tried to prevent this, but could not prevail over King Xiaolie. If he had not sent people to assist us, we could have forgotten about escaping from Chu's borders. That is why on this trip we should first visit Lord Chunshen's home."

Xiang Shaolong and Yanran exchanged a glance and let go of their worries.

Now that King Xiaolie is dead, Chu is going to become a battleground between Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan. To someone like Madam Zhuang who is close to Lord Chunshen, killing Li Yuan's associate Tian Dan is naturally no big deal.

Xiang Shaolong's spirit rose, saying: "Good! Let us leave!"

Zhao Zhi was displeased, saying: "Madam has yet to say how Sister Yanran and I should disguise ourselves!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "Of course it is to be me, Wan Ruiguang's lovely wives. Covering your faces with thicker veils will solve all the problems."

All along, before a strong Qin arose, amongst all the states, Chu was in the South with no enemies nearby. That is why regardless of the physical security or the economy, they have had safety and stability where the other states hadn't.

In addition, the soil in the South was fertile. Surrounding Lake Dongting were endless tracts of fertile land waiting to be developed by the Chu people. This caused the Chu people to be rich and worry free.

At their peak, Chu possessed all the territories from Yuan and Xiang rivers in the South to Ying and Si in the North, and from Ba and Shu in the West to the Tan city and the river Huai in the East. Treating Ying and Ru as ditches and Jiang and Han as ponds; as flat as Zhenglin, as continuous as Fangcheng. By the time the Warring States Period began, they had almost unified the entire South, becoming the largest and most powerful state.

Besides swallowing numerous smaller countries, they had also expanded into large tracts of land belonging to the non-Han barbarians in the East, South and Southwest, subjecting these lands and peoples to Chu's culture and civilization.

Just as Ji Yanran had analyzed nonetheless, to govern so many ethnic groups and such a vast expanse of land required a powerful and competent government.

It was a pity that after King Zidao and King Xuan, Chu had never had a competent ruler again. In addition, with King Huai dying destitute in Qin, the central authorities lost their power while the regional powers rose up.

King Xiaolie's subsequent instigation of the mutiny in Yunnan reduced central control even further. In the end, he did not manage to change anything, merely changing the name of the Yunnan king from Zhuang to Li, that's all.

Now that King Xiaolie has passed away, internal strife has appeared once again. And due to the freak combination of factors, Xiang Shaolong is compelled to join this "game".

While the news of Chu's chaos may be unexpected, it was actually inevitable. If not for the fact that Qin had just lost two kings in quick succession, and that Xiao Pan was still immature, and for the Qin military's free-for-all fight with Lu Buwei, and even more for Qin's need to concentrate on defending the three Eastern counties, Chu would have been forced even further South.

Chu's people have become leisurely and carefree due to their wealth, and have been at odds with the solemn and tense Northerners all along.

This was very vividly described by Ji Yanran.

After leaving the Qinling mountains and after two days march on uneven

roads, they finally reached the Hanzhong plains.

While one of Madam Zhuang's household chiefs led the two men Dan Quan and Wu Guang to meet Teng Yi, everyone else set out for Shouchun.

Ji Yanran rode alongside Xiang Shaolong and started discussing Chu's culture, saying: "Even though Chu is the enemy of my lost country, I have always admired Chu's culture. Looking at their religious beliefs, they do not follow the callous god of farmers, but worship the aspiring and high flying god of fire; their river goddess is a beautiful woman that makes the soul long for her. The other gods are either colorful and bewitching girls or passionate and self-sacrificing heroes. Even more, the songs of Chu are full of euphemism and rhetoric, melancholic yet beautiful, leaving one with lingering emotions." Xiang Shaolong became a little jealous, said: "But I've never found any trace of such beautiful things on Li Yuan."

Ji Yanran laughed delicately and rolled her eyes, but could not help smiling, said: "He wasn't trying to woo you, why would he want to show you his literary talent?"

Exhaling her breath of magical air, she smugly but joyfully said: "Its good that Hubby rarely speaks with such jealousy."

At this moment, Madam Zhuang sent someone to ask them to fall back, and taking advantage of the uneventful journey, to teach them the local accent. Xiang Shaolong and his party could only bear with it and took instructions.

During that period in the Warring States era, the most fashionable language

was Zhou. All the different states' royalty and anyone with any amount of status used this language to communicate.

Nonetheless, due to differences in the regions, the Zhou language was always mixed with local dialects and slangs.

That is why one could guess a person's origins just from his speech.

Of the Warring States, the most alike were Zhao, Wei and Han. This was because these three states were splintered from the former Jin state.

Because Qin's culture was shallow, and also because of its proximity to the three Jin states, the Qin accent and slang was similar to the three states'.

The most distinctive state was actually Chu.

Up to today, Chu's people have been ridiculed as the "Southern Barbarians", and their difference in choice of words is even greater. That is why it is important for Xiang Shaolong's party to swallow this little bit of pain to learn the Yunnan variant of the Chu language.

Chu's locus of influence centered on the vast regions on the Yangtze River's two banks and the vast Lake Dongting, stretching South.

Shouchun is North of the Yantze River on the West bank of the River Huai. This is more than a thousand miles East of the old capital Ying, which was originally situated on the Northwest corner of Lake Dongting. Although this allowed the capital to be safely removed from Qin, it demonstrated a lack of

fighting spirit on the part of the Chu people. It was no wonder that even though Chu was big, it was the most contemptible in the eyes of the three states.

After a three day journey, having crossed the Tongbai montains, they reached Chengyang city on the Western end of the River Huai. They found a guest house to lodge in before sending Zhuang Kong out to buy a boat. The boat would reduce the ardor of their journey.

Since they had to adopt high ranking identities to enter the city, the current governor Qushen sent staff to pay an official call right after they had let down their luggage and stabled their horses

Xiang Shaolong naturally left Madam Zhuang to manage this, choosing to remain in his room and amusing himself with his two lovely wives, greatly enjoying this return to civilization.

Madam Zhuang soon came over and sat down on a mat, happily saying: "We have solved the problem of the boat. Once the governor Official Qu found out who I was, he was very helpful."

The Madam Zhuang who had put on a long robe once again exuded charm.

The robe she was wearing was the most fashionable at that time, a dark robe. It was a one piece robe stretching from top to bottom with the right lapel joined at an angle. Wrapping from the front to the back, it caused beautiful women to exude a certain charm. She had combed her hair in a 'descending horse topknot', pulling her delicate hair behind her forehead in a

low-hanging knot, looking very much like she had just descended from horseback. Adding to her charming demeanor, she bent her waist in a graceful step, creating a sight not to be missed.

Xiang Shaolong cautioned himself never to fall for this beautiful woman, else he would be giving himself a lot of trouble in the future. Moreover, as a man from the 21st Century, he is already very satisfied to have his many lovely wives. He should be more devoted to Ji Yanran and all his wives. Ji Yanran was also sizing up this enchanting and elegant beauty. Apparently feeling a little threatened, she said unenthusiastically: "I once stayed in Shouchun for a short while. I wonder at present, which of the four peoples, Dou, Cheng, Yuan and Qu hold the most power?" Xiang Shaolong immediately thought of Qu Yuan (a famous Warring States statesman). So this lord is actually from one of the four main ethnic groups in Chu. No wonder he is able to become an important official.

Madam Zhuang's beautiful eyes swept over Xiang Shaolong before saying: "The four big ethnic groups are no longer as industrious as before. It is Li Yuan's ethnic group that has been rising up. Of course it is the most powerful group outside the four big groups. Moreover since Li Yuan became the crown prince, the Li clan has been rising with the tide. Now that Li Yuan has actually managed to counter the Empress Dowager who wields real power, who will not curry favor with the Li clan?"

Xiang Shaolong saw that Madam Zhuang understood Shouchun's situation thoroughly and could not help but ask: "Did Li Yuan bring back Guo Kai's daughter Guo Xiuer as wife?" Madam Zhuang nodded and said: "Indeed. I even heard that she is expecting, earning Li Yuan's considerable affection."

Xiang Shaolong's attention couldn't help drifting to the phoenix shaped jade pendant hanging on his chest. This was the object that Guo Xiu'er gave to him before obeying her father's command to marry Li Yuan. Thinking about it, he couldn't help feeling a little torn and dejected!

Madam Zhuang gazed at him deeply, then lowered her head, as if trying to discern what secret reason he had to ask about Guo Xiu'er.

The two ladies Ji and Zhao knew about the relationship between him and Guo Xiu'er and paid no notice to it. The former asked: "Did Guo Zhong move his business over?" Madam Zhuang cracked her eyebrow, saying: "I am not too sure about this."

Xiang Shaolong felt that the atmosphere had changed, and changing the topic, he asked: "Is there one Madam Xie amongst the Wang people? Lady Huayang once asked me to deliver a gift to her, but I never reached Chu in the end."

Madam Zhuang nodded her head and said: "I can't be sure, but if she has some connection to my aunt, it must be Madam Qing Xiu. Her good looks are famous in Chu. She was married to the great general Dou Jie. Initially Dou Jie loved and pampered her, but later he was enchanted by the Minister-of-State Cheng Suning's concubine Yan Fei. In a fit of anger, Madam Qing Xiu left and moved to a house beside the Huai river in the outskirts of the city, thereafter leading a secluded life. With the threat of suicide, she forbade Dou Jie from entering the front gate by even half a step. Her resolve earned the Chu people's respect. Dou Jie lost King Xiaolie's favor after that. Now that he has attached himself to the Li clan though, his trajectory seems to have

improved somewhat."

Zhao Zhi was puzzled and asked: "Since that Yan Fei was the Minister-of-State Cheng Suning's beloved concubine, how did she get involved with Dou Jie?"

Madam Zhuang contemptuously replied: "Of all people this Cheng Suning spineless. Dou Jie was an important military official. With just a hinted request from Dou Jie, he obediently offered up Yan Fei. As our Zhuang family returns, the greatest obstacle to us is the group of people led by Li Yuan. This is because Li Ling is precisely Li Yuan's older paternal cousin and fellow clan member."

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help feeling excited, but before he could open his mouth, Wu Yan knocked on the door seeking an audience. As he entered, he had a serious look on his face, saying: "Something is not right. Just now we detected a suspicious person in the vicinity investigating us. Later when official Qu Shen left, he hid in a carriage with another suspicious person on the streets outside and had a long discussion. Afterwards, all those suspicious people withdrew." Madam Zhuang's expression did not change as she listened.

Xiang Shaolong was able to smile unhurriedly and said: "Looks like they intend to deal with us while we are on the boat. As long as they bore a hole in the boat and sink us, their men can murder your son in the water. Our plan to return to your country is about to fail. We must think this through carefully."

Madam Zhuang said: "What should we do then? The boatman and helmsmen are all their people."

Ji Yanran wittily said: "As long as we can leave Cheng Yang, we can have the boat without the people. We'll see what Qu Shen is able to do to us then." At dawn, the official Qu Shen came personally to send them off. Three sails were masted on the large boat. They set sail following the current.

There were thirty boatmen on the boat, all valiant and strong. On the surface they looked respectful, but one could tell that they had malicious intent. Nonetheless Xiang Shaolong did not worry about them, having scheduled twelve of the guardians to spy on them continuously for twelve hours. They spent their time alternately learning Chu with the Yunnan flavor and taking the chance to rest. All this to allow them to reach Tian Dan as quickly as possible once they reached Shouchun, and then to quickly leave after.

He was not too worried that his real identity will be revealed. This is because Tian Dan and Li Yuan and their associates were all high officials. Even if he, being a general who had lost his home, deliberately sought an appointment with them, it would be difficult to get an opportunity. That is why the odds of bumping into them accidentally are tiny.

The only difficulty is how to obtain Tian Dan's whereabouts.

The scenery of the South is not much different from that of the Northwest, picturesque and mesmerizing.

It is the time between Spring and Summer and the boat is sailing freely. The

distant forests of Pingshan divided on the left and right. In the middle of the peaceful landscape, the crystal clear waters of the river flowed in a torrent.

As they followed the river down, they frequently saw fishing boats fishing in the middle of the river. It was hard to associate this scene with the endless ferocious battles of the Warring States era.

Over the meandering river, as they negotiated each bend, a different scene appeared before them, preventing them from being bored.

As there were outsiders present, the two ladies Ji and Zhao wore caps which covered their faces, adding to their yearning, mysterious beauty.

Those malicious boatmen kept eyeing their silky bosoms and curvy buttocks, evidently harboring lewd intentions on the women, in addition to murder.

It is not clear whether it was because of Chu's forced relocation, but of the cultural differences between Chu and the three Jin states plus Qin, the most obvious was that in Chu when married women left the house, they would put on all kinds of veils, being unaffected by the inconvenience and obstruction.

Besides putting on a cap and a veil, they also used a handkerchief to cover their bunned up hair. They then lengthen these once again to cover their faces. These are invariably thinly spread and made of muslin. The texture is frivolous and once it is put on the face, it gives the wearer mysterious aura with its translucence, adding to the wearer's fascination and attractiveness.

If beauties like Yanran and Zhao Zhi put these on, they would become

exceedingly beautiful, causing Xiang Shaolong to wish for night to come so that he could see more.

After the last few days, Xiang Shaolong has grown an inch-long beard, not only changing his appearance, but also increasing his imposing aura. It was very common for people in that era to leave beards, with scholars and officials sporting especially long beards; but with military leaders leaving short ones, therefore bare-faced men were instead uncommon.

As Xiang Shaolong was enjoying the beautiful scenery with his two women at the front of the boat, Zhuang Kong came over to his side and said in a low voice: "Before we reach the upper reaches of Qi Si county, there is a stretch where the water is rapid and deep, with dangerous interlinking shoals and precipices. It is the best place for those thieves to make their move."

Xiang Shaolong said in a low voice: "When will we reach that point?"  
Zhuang Kong replied: "We should reach there after dark."

After Zhuang Kong left, Xiang Shaolong faced the river and sighed. Zhao Zhi was instantly surprised and said: "Is Hubby worrying over these few petty thieves?" Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "They may be petty thieves, but they have ruined my grand plans to carouse on the couch with my two lovely wives tonight. How can I not let out a sign of resentment?"

The two ladies laughed excitedly, looking unspeakably captivating.

## Chapter 10

### Another Sudden Change

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The evening brought sudden showers which lasted half the night. Though the rain lightened eventually, an unending sheet of water covered the ground, and the sky was covered by thick dark clouds, creating a heavy dreary atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong together with his two lovely wives, Madam Zhuang, Youcui and Youning, and the child Zhuang Baoyi were all in the cabin sharing a meal.

This is the first time the two parties have shared a meal together since they met, demonstrating that they have grown a little bit closer.

Zhuang Baoyi periodically looked at Xiang Shaolong with earnest admiration. Ji Yanran favored the child the most and couldn't help but ask: "What is the Little Master thinking of?"

Zhuang Baoyi blushed instantly and lowered his head, replying: "Baoyi hopes to be Mister Xiang's disciple, to learn the sword." Madam Zhuang and Youcui Youning the two women smiled and silently awaited Xiang Shaolong's response. Xiang Shaolong could not bear to hurt a little child's feelings, not to mention that his circumstances were desperate. He smiled and said: "Are you able to endure hardship?"

Zhuang Baoyi puffed up his little chest boldly and said: "Baoyi is most able to

endure suffering. If you do not believe me, you may ask my mother."

Madam Zhuang exultantly said: "If he is able to learn from the number one swordsman West of Qin and the master of the king of Qin, this woman will be grateful to tears. Baoyi, quickly go pay your respects and offer the formal rites."

Baoyi immediately raised his clasped hands in the formal rite before sitting down again. The atmosphere had turned even friendlier. Xiang Shaolong knew that his spiritual and mental responsibility to the Zhuang family has now increased by three parts.

Recalling that even if Zhuang Baoyi is able to ascend the Yunnan throne, he cannot escape his other disciple Xiao Pan's destruction of his country. He did not know whether to be happy or sad.

Madam Zhuang kept glancing at him with her charming eyes. The other two ladies Youcui and Youning also ogled at him occasionally. Thankfully they were noblewomen, else their looks would have been even more seductive and their words more suggestive.

Xiang Shaolong did not mind responding, but it was more important to honor Ji and Zhao the two lovely wives, so he was careful that his bearing and words did not overstep his boundaries. Hence, while the meal appeared exciting, only he was aware of his difficulties.

At this moment, Wu Guang rushed in and whispered into Xiang Shaolong's ear: "We found chiseling tools and a large jar of flammable oil at the bottom

of the boat. It seems that this pack of sons of b!tches wish to sink the boat and set fire to it at the same time, attacking us from both angles."

Madam Zhuang and the rest quietly listened to the exchange between Xiang Shaolong and Wu Guang.

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Did you manage to listen in on their conversations?"

Under Xiang Shaolong's planning, they had been equipped with all kinds of original eavesdropping devices, like the so named 'next-door ear' which was a copper cylinder shaped like a horn. This can be placed on a wall to amplify sounds from the other side, allowing one to listen in secretly.

Wu Guang indiscriminately said: "Of course we heard. Even their sounds of taking a dump and taking a leak cannot escape us."

The women all blushed at those words. Zhao Zhi was annoyed and said: "Little Guang, can you please restrain yourself a little?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed and said: "Quick, say it out!"

Wu Guang first apologized to Zhao Zhi, then said: "Their leader is called Cheng Xi, and he is the relative of the Minister of State Cheng Suning's relative. From their tone of voice, it seems that they already knew Madam and her party would be heading for Shouchun these few days, and have deliberately waited here patiently for an entire month, seeking to murder everyone. Hei, I also feel like saying the same to them."

As Madam Zhuang heard this, her expression changed slightly, but she lowered her head and remained silent. Xiang Shaolong asked: "Is there anything else? Did they mention when they would make their move?"

Wu Guang joyfully said: "Of course not. But they were not able to hide from us experts that they had prepared sedatives and mixed it in the water. Once they have drugged us, they would rape all the women then scuttle the boat while setting fire at the same time."

As Madam Zhuang the three women heard the sensitive word 'rape', even their eyelids turned red.

This time even Ji Yanran scolded: "Wu Guang, your mouth is really dirty, and you are extremely lacking in manners!"

Zhao Zhi was actually worried about something else and asked: "Is there anything wrong with the water we are drinking now?"

Wu Guang replied: "Of course there is no problem. Water that has been drugged has a strange smell/taste that needs to be masked by tea. Later if they bring a pot of tea over to entertain Madam, you definitely mustn't drink it."

Wu Guang's vulgar humor reminded Xiang Shaolong of Wu Guo's refined humor, and even more couldn't help thinking of Zhao Ya. Has Wu Guo been able to bring Zhao Ya safely to Xianyang? This beauty has suffered greatly.

Amidst the laughter and scolding, Wu Guang was chased away by Zhao Zhi. Ji

Yanran apologized to Madam Zhuang and the rest for Wu Guang's vulgar words.

Madam Zhuang did not mind, and even said: "People like little brother Guang are authentic. Your servant has met many people who are sanctimonious and verbally full of benevolence, but have been secretly harmed by them without even knowing what it was all about."

Ji Yanran said: "Madam's present trip back to Chu should have been a secret, how did Cheng Suning hear about this, such that he even sent men here to plot against you?"

Madam Zhuang said in distress: "Nowadays I am unable to fathom who my enemies really are."

At this moment, someone did indeed knock on the door. This person kneeled down and said: "Your servant has specially come to offer Chengyang's speciality, 'soothing tea'. The flavor may be a bit odd, but once you've drunk it you'll be relaxed and unafraid of the wind and the waves. It is a special offering from the governor Official Qu to Madam and the young master."

Madam Zhuang pretended to be elated and accepted the gift.

After the person had left, Xiang Shaolong leaned over to Zhao Zhi's delicate ear and said: "Those people are really cooperative. We will have unbridled enjoyment tonight!"

Zhao Zhi could not imagine that Xiang Shaolong would say such naughty

things to her in such a public setting and blushed instantly.

As she saw their loving exchange, Madam Zhuang's originally bright and sparkling eyes started to tear.

Before the battle has started, she has already lost.

As Xiang Shaolong and the rest pretended faint from drinking the drugged tea, the pack of scoundrels finally revealed their ferocious faces. Using silent and lightning quick moves, the guardians knocked them down, subdued them and tied the lot of them up.

The boat has landed in their hands.

Xiang Shaolong followed Madam Zhuang up on deck. He instructed the guardians to put the murdering scoundrels in a row and proceeded to interrogate them.

The two banks of the river are shrouded in darkness. Though the rain has stopped, there was not a star in sight.

Xiang Shaolong coldly said: "Who is Cheng Xi?"

The thirty bound enemies could not imagine that they already knew the name Cheng Xi, and were all startled. Nonetheless they all closed their mouths and remained silent with a defiant expression that implied 'do you really dare to kill me?'.

Xiang Shaolong quietly sighed, turned to Madam Zhuang and said: "Madam, please turn your head and avoid looking."

Madam Zhuang steadied herself and said: "I am not afraid!"

Xiang Shaolong made a signal, and Wu Shu who was behind the prisoners put his leg on the back of one of them. As the prisoner's arms and legs were tied together, he fell forward immediately and rolled on the floor.

From Xiang Shaolong's side, Jing Shan rushed over and put his foot on the prisoner's back, drawing his long sword with a 'Qiang' sound. Coming close to him, he said: "This is your last chance, who is Cheng Xi!"

That person would not yield and spat with a 'pie!' sound, giving a disdainful look.

Jing Shan laughed coldly and waved his long sword. Blood splashed from that person's throat and he died violently under the long sword.

With a 'dong dong' sound like rain, two of the prisoners were so frightened that they fainted on the floor. The legs of the rest of the prisoners started to tremble and their faces turned pale. They did not think that the other party would be so merciless.

Madam Zhuang's face turned deathly white. She did not expect them to kill for real. She unconsciously leaned her delicate body against Xiang Shaolong. Jing Shan nonchalantly wiped his bloodstained blade on the dead man before allowing the corpse to be brought aside.

Zhuang Kong and the rest of Madam Zhuang's servants all bugged their eyes and stared blankly. Although killing in this era is no big deal to soldiers, but Jing Shan's calm cold-blooded attitude before and after the killing shocked both the enemy and themselves.

In those days when Xiang Shaolong selected his eighteen guardians, his one criterion was persistence and resolve. Only those who were not afraid to kill and be killed were entitled to be selected. In this era of conflict where the weak are eaten by the strong, showing mercy to the enemy is as good as being merciless to oneself. If it were them who were captured today, they would not have died so easily. This was especially so for Ji and Zhao and all the beauties.

Xiang Shaolong pointed at another person and said in a dead-pan voice: "Which one of you is Cheng Xi?" That person's legs went limp and following his two colleagues slumped in a faint. His eyes went to a particularly dark and well built man. That man, knowing that his cover had been blown, stood forward and shouted: "You do not have to investigate any further, I am Cheng Xi. If you dare..." 'Peng!' Wu Guang kicked forward and hit his nether regions. He bowed down in pain and collapsed on the floor, unable to speak anymore.

Xiang Shaolong laughed and said: "Bring him below deck to await punishment. Lets see how long he can hold out." Wu Shu, Jing Shan and the rest happily forced him away.

All the other captives looked as if their faces had been wrapped in mud, bodies trembling.

Xiang Shaolong said: "Split these guys up and interrogate them separately. Allow them to confess, but if anyone speaks half a sentence of falsehood or deliberately conceals anything, kill them immediately without pardon."

Zhuang Kong and the rest immediately swarmed around with the other guardians and brought the captives to different corners of the boat for interrogation.

Madam Zhuang's delicate body weakly leaned on Xiang Shaolong, and she said softly: "This is the first time I have seen this kind of heavy and terrifying methods. Mister must have been too gentle with people in the past."

Xiang Shaolong lightly held her shoulders for a while and using a gentle voice, said: "Please return to the cabin and rest. By breakfast time tomorrow, we will have news from the interrogation."

Madam Zhuang looked like she was very reluctant to leave Xiang Shaolong's side and softly said: "What are we going to do with these people?"

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly and said: "I really wish to release all of them, but this will be the most foolish thing to do. Especially since they have seen our methods, they will be suspicious. Madam Zhang should understand my meaning."

At dawn there wasn't a captive left on the boat. The bloodstains had all been scrubbed away. As they were having breakfast in the master cabin, Xiang Shaolong said to Madam Zhuang: "It is not just Cheng Suning behind this matter, it also includes Dou Jie and a man called Fang Zhuo. Does Madam

have any impression of him? It is reported that it was Fang Zhuo who reported Madam's return to Shouchun to Dou Jie and Cheng Suning."

Madam Zhuang's face turned white, saying: "Of course I recognize Fang Zhuo, he is one of Lord Chunshen's hangers-on. He has always been responsible for transmitting news to us. He has unexpectedly betrayed us."

Youcui said in a trembling voice: "Could Lord Chunshen be the mastermind behind the plot?" Madam Zhuang shook her head determinedly and said: "Lord Chunshen definitely will not do such a thing, much less if Baoyi is able to regain the throne, it will bring him hundreds of benefits and not one drawback. Even more he is not this kind of base and despicable person. Looks like Fang Zhuo has been bought by Cheng Suning."

Ji Yanran asked: "Why does Cheng Suning and Dou Jie want young master dead?"

Madam Zhuang replied: "There are presently more than ten vassal states within Chu's borders. Amongst them, the four states Yunnan, Yelang, Minshan and Qielan are the biggest and strongest. They all have more than ten thousand troops each. The king of Chu is bound to have deep misgivings about them. While he would like to abolish the vassal lords, he does not dare to act rashly, fearing that the vassal lords will band together to resist Chu. And since our Zhuang family's prestige is highest in the country, we have the standing to lead all the vassal lords. That is why we were the first group that Xiaolie needed to deal with; nonetheless he does not dare to do this openly, and can only conspire with the traitor Li Ling to revolt. However, the Yunnan people's hearts are with us the Zhuang family. The other vassal lords are also

vigorously supporting the restoration of the Zhuang family. If not how would the Li clan that Li Yuan represent allow us to return to our home country?"

Zhao Zhi said: "Since this is the case, as Madam heads to Shouchun on this trip, isn't it akin to sending the sheep into the lion's den?"

Madam Zhuang replied: "Right now, the most of the decision makers in Shouchun do not follow Li Yuan, but follow Lord Chunshen. Moreover, amongst the four big clans, besides legless people like Dou Jie and Cheng Suning who rely on the Li clan, the people are mostly dissatisfied with Li Ling as king of Yunnan. Even Li Yuan does not dare to support Li Ling openly. In fact the reason your servant's party is heading for Shouchun first is to formally request the Chu court to censure the illegal conduct of the traitorous Li Ling. This is because my deceased husband's family friend Weng is precisely one of the Chu court's policy makers."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly gleeful and said: "This is the best. I think Li Yuan must definitely try to delay matters. This is because if it is revealed that he had a hand in Li Ling's betrayal, all the vassal lords will realize their danger and seek to secede. Especially so, if we meet any unexpected misfortune, everyone will know who did it. That is when everything is revealed to the heavens, we will be safest."

Youning let out a giggle, and delicately laughed: "Mister Xiang's choice of words is very odd. What 'unexpected misfortune' and 'revealed to the heavens'. Nonetheless having heard these words, the description fits very well."

Of course Xiang Shaolong is aware of this problem, and obscured the issue by saying: "We should be able to relax a little these few days."

Madam Zhuang laughed: "No, it is actually time for you to put on your disguise."

Xiang Shaolong sat in front of a dressing table in the cabin looking at the mirror's reflection. His nose detected the fragrance of Youcui and Youning's body and clothes, feeling as if he had entered a nation of fragrances.

Youcui affectionately pressed on both his broad shoulders and knelt behind looking over his left shoulder, also looking at the reflection, saying: "Older sister did not exaggerate the skill that we two sisters once learned from Chu's number one makeup artist Miss Su Liu. We can turn any beautiful face ugly and any ugly face beautiful."

Xiang Shaolong felt her bosom pressing generously on his back. He was unable to endure it, yet was too embarrassed to ask her to move back, and to be honest, he really enjoyed it. He said: "But I am a man!" Youning who was on the other side working with a few makeup kits said: "Chu's men love to make up. We used to do makeup for the great king everyday!" After she said that, her expression turned gloomy. She must have remembered her late husband.

Youcui then said: "There are two kinds of face powder. One kind is made from ground rice grains infused with perfume. The other kind is pasty face resin called 'lead powder'. The latter is longer-lasting. As long as we apply it once per day, we can guarantee that no one will recognize you."

Xiang Shaolong secretly realized: No wonder the Chinese word for makeup 粉 comprises of the words 米 meaning rice, and 分 meaning separate. It turns out that in this era, makeup is made from rice. He replied: "Has nobody ever met Wan Ruiguang?" The more Youcui looks at Xiang Shaolong, the more she was attracted to him, almost pasting her face on his cheek, her charming eyes like silk, said: "Wan Ruiguang is from Yunnan, belonging to a clan from South Yunnan. Older sister is South Yunnan's number one beauty. She once followed our late father to Shouchun to meet the Chu king. Before escaping to Qin, Wan Ruiguang had never set foot out of South Yunnan. Even Li Ling has never met him. It is difficult to find one person in Shouchun who recognizes him."

Xiang Shaolong reflected: No wonder the Yunnan people gave the Zhuang family so much support. It was because they used system of marriage. It need not be said that Zhuang wives all had the status of being the local clan leader's daughters. No wonder the Chu people were so fearful of Zhuang Baoyi's return to Yunnan.

Youning then came in front of Xiang Shaolong and carefully examined his face.

Xiang Shaolong said: "It is three more days to Shouchun, do the two Madams really need to start work now?" Youning rolled her charming eyes once and an said angrily: "We need to experiment to find out which method is best to change your appearance! We might even have to come up with a special formula. A few days might not even be enough."

The Youcui at his back sighed into his ear and with a 'ne' sound she asked:

"Doesn't uncle like to be waited upon by us sisters? We know the techniques of Chinese massage and know best how to serve men."

Once she has finished speaking, she began to knead his shoulder muscles.

That is undeniably a very pleasurable experience. Moreover she is definitely an expert at this. Xiang Shaolong could not help laughing and groaning.

Youning flashed her charming sister an annoyed look, then raised a small cup with a glue-like white substance and started to stir it with a pestle. She said: "Your skin is relatively dark. Your servant will make it look like you have not been in the sun for a long time. This will allay people's suspicion."

She then carefully applied the 'lead powder' on his face. It was very cool and refreshing, plus she was using her delicate finger to massage it on, so for a moment, Xiang Shaolong forgot where he was.

Youcui who was at his back deliberated with her younger sister: "I think it is best to use some rouge to make his lip colour lighter and to make his eyebrows coarser. Then dye his beard and hair would be most appropriate."

Xiang Shaolong jumped in surprise, saying: "What if I can't return to my original appearance? Wouldn't that be terrible!" Youcui laughed until her whole body collapsed onto his back and panted, saying: "What a vain man! You only have to use a special lotion to wash it, guaranteed everything will disappear."

Xiang Shaolong nervously looked at the person that was gradually

materialising in the mirror and said: "If I become some gaudily made up guy, you can forget about me appearing outdoors in broad daylight." The two ladies laughed until they had to bend down. Youning took the opportunity to bury her head in his chest.

Youcui then said: "The highest form of makeup is to cause people to think that there is no makeup. If you do not believe, take a look at us and elder sister!" Xiang Shaolong looked at the two of them a few times. Indeed they did not look heavily made-up. He then put his mind at ease, whole heartedly enjoying the two delicious women's service.

After Youning had completed his facial make-up, she began to draw on his eyebrows and emotionally said: "Of the men that my sisters and I have met, Mister Xiang is the nobleman who observes the most propriety. But do you know that your two servant sisters are perfectly happy to wait upon Sir Xiang."

Youcui who was at his back then started to dismantle the hero's ornaments on his head and said: "Thinking that after we reach Yunnan, your servant sisters will have to split with Sir Xiang leads us to feel dispirited. But thinking about the love that our late father gave to us, your servant sisters' gain and losses count as nothing!" Xiang Shaolong did not think that they would reveal their feelings openly and felt a little moved. If they had not met him, Madam Zhuang's entire party would no doubt have been killed, and even more the women would have had to suffer insult. The three ladies are nonetheless returning to Chu on behalf of their late husbands without a second thought. Such real self-sacrificing valor calls for one's veneration.

As he was wondering how to answer them, Madam Zhuang came in with the company of Zhao Zhi to have a look at him.

Zhao Zhi almost couldn't recognize her husband. She was astounded and said: "Elder sisters Cui and Ning are brilliant, looks like I and Sister Yanran should get a makeover too."

Madam Zhuang said: "As long as you dye your hair a little grey, you will look approximately ten years older. And if you cover yourselves with a face towel, nobody will recognize you."

Xiang Shaolong looked at himself in the mirror. His confidence increased as he figured that even if he bumped into Li Yuan and Tian Dan face to face he could guarantee that they would not recognize him, especially if he put on some Yunnan style attire.

## Chapter 11

### Shouchun, the Chu Capital

After the old Chu capital Ying was taken by the Qin general Bai Qi, Chu's King Qu retreated East in defeat. Twice they moved their capital, getting further away from Qin.

The land East of the River Huai originally belonged to the Chen state, but was conquered by Chu. As a result, King Xiang absorbed Chen's soldiers, numbering a hundred thousand. After recovering their former strength, they seized fifteen cantons back from Qin, and regained their impetus.

Yesteryear when they united the other four states to attack Qin and defeated Meng Ao's soldiers, the Qin people sealed their passes and did not dare to face their attack. It appeared that overnight, Chu had regained the position of hegemony they enjoyed during the Spring and Autumn era.

In the end, even though Chu had lost a large piece of their territory, their territory was deep so it was difficult for the Qin people to continue attacking. This allowed Chu to rise again despite their retreat.

Shouchun is situated to the North of the Huai river. Compared to two other strategic posts Cai Cheng and Jia Jiang, it had better communication links. The Chu people also had deep foundations in this area, with no shortage of manpower and natural resources. Therefore they had another grand occasion (setting up a new capital). At that time, they really had greater

momentum than all the other Northeastern countries. The capital Shouchun is especially big, with walls that look like a winnowing basket. The city is more than thirty miles wide, and the outer walls are fifty miles wide. It could be said to be one of the greatest cities of that time, its scale being second only to Xianyang. It was also protected by four city walls. With more than twenty thousand households, it was unusually prosperous.

In addition, the river valley was fertile, hence there was abundant food. This caused Shouchun to become Chu's most bustling metropolis after succeeding Ying as capital. All the most important buildings were concentrated in the central inner castle; the palace, the court arena, government storehouses, government treasury, temple of the ancestors, the earth deity and the harvest deity, and lodging houses for high officials and foreign emissaries were all in this area. The outer city is criss-crossed with streets, with an orderly distribution of residences, mausoleums, guest houses and shops.

Shouchun's city defenses are tight. At the entrance of the city wall, there is a portcullis that could be raised or lowered. It is surrounded by a moat and is guarded by Chu soldiers day and night. All who pass through the city gates must pay taxes.

As Xiang Shaolong and his party approached the pier outside the city, they were cut off by a Chu warship. Only after inspecting Madam Zhuang's credentials did they allow them to anchor at the pier. They were still not allowed to go ashore while another group of officials entered the city to make a report.

They could only wait onboard the ship patiently.

At this moment, Xiang Shaolong had changed into a loose-fitting gown to disguise his healthy and beautiful body. His hair and beard was mottled with grey patches to simulate premature aging. His complexion was pale and his eyebrows were so thick as to obscure his eyes. Compared to the former Dong Horse Fanatic, he now looked even more unlike Xiang Shaolong.

After waiting half a day, they finally saw a convoy of carriages leave the city towards them. They were led by a big fatty, wearing official dress. He was about fifty with slender eyes and a big nose. He looked a little like a second generation lord whose spirit and body had been corroded by wine and women.

Madam Zhuang was waiting respectfully on board the ship, and spoke quietly to Xiang Shaolong who was beside her: "That fatty is Lord Chunshen Huang Xie."

Xiang Shaolong's heart took a turn. In the beginning he still thought it was some kind of lackey from Huang Xie's house, how was he to know that it was Huang Xie himself?

Amongst the four princes of the Warring States era, Xiang Shaolong has only met Prince Xinling. Nonetheless it looks like Huang Xie has the worst appearance amongst them. No wonder he is the least famous of the four princes.

As he thought about how Zhao Mu, who did not look like him at all, tried to kill him, he felt a little queasy.

Ji Yanran who was on his other side said: "He seems to have grown a little fatter since the last time I saw him."

Xiang Shaolong finally awoke to the fact that Ji Yanran had been here, and trembled. If Chunshen spots her, since he was the enemy who killed his son, they will be exterminated immediately.

Thankfully Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi look nothing like the original after they had been made up and had put on Chu style clothes.

Compared to the other countries, the women's clothes of Chu look extra spacious and gorgeous. A long cheongsam that drags on the ground, with a white cummerbund on the waist, an oblique collar, pleats extending to the back, broad sleeves and lower hem, hats on top of the head with a ribbon under the chin. All these together with their heavily powdered faces gave the Chu women an exotic air.

As for the two ladies' hairdo, they were managed by Madam Zhuang and her two sisters. The fringes were neatly combed and the hair braided from the temples and pulled behind the head and the neck, forming two knots at the top of the head.

Just with this change of hairstyle, Xiang Shaolong failed to recognize them in a moment of confusion, much less with the slightly grizzled hair which caused them to look older by twenty years.

The five ladies' Chu style dresses were differentiated by their colours; vermillion, purplish red, firefly gold, plain green and natural indigo. In

addition, there was embroidery with dragons, phoenix, birds and other motifs accompanied by twigs and branches, leaves and grass, flowers and plants, and geometric lines. The compositions were unique and vivid. This was a good illustration of the Chu people's rich imagination, colorful mythology and culture.

Men's clothes were relatively plain. The robes were long with uncovered legs. With a right overlapping lapel that intersects with the collar and wide loose sleeves, a tight cuff, with lines from the robe to the cuff, relying on deep black, white and other colours to emphasize the design. The most eye-catching was the cummerbund, with different contrasting and alternating colours mixed together.

All the guardians changed into the uniform of Chu warriors. Jacket over the waist, crimp legged trousers, boots, with emblems sewn on the prominent places. Their hairstyles were all changed and they were all wearing Chu hats. They looked fairly interesting.

At this moment, Lord Chunshen arrived at the shore, made a signal to the men and invited them onshore.

Madam Zhuang, assisted by the two stout female servants, gracefully led the party ashore.

Perhaps Xiang Shaolong was overly sensitive, but he saw Lord Chunshen's narrow eyes brighten, firmly staring at her lovely waist, seeming to lust uncontrollably after the delicately beautiful Madam Zhuang, who looked like she could be broken by a light wind.

Huang Xie and his men descended their horses one after another.

Madam Zhuang has just paid her respects when she bitterly wailed: "The Lord needs to decide on behalf of your servant!" Huang Xie immediately flailed his arms and legs and said: "Princess Wan, please do not be troubled. The government will give everything due consideration later."

Next his two squinty eyes flitted over Xiang Shaolong, seeming to be wary of a skilled person, said: "Its an honor to finally meet Mister Wan, and indeed he displays great talent. this Lord is delighted.

Xiang Shaolong understood the principle that with a famous reputation, one did not need to be timid. Even though this Lord Chunshen indulges in wine and women, the moment one sees his eyes, one is able to tell that he is deep and shrewd, completely unlike his external appearance. He promptly controlled his voice and replied in his recently acquired Yunnan accented fashionable Zhou language of Chu: "Lord's formidable name shakes the whole earth. It should be Ruiguang who feels honored."

As Huang Xie's vision flitted across Ji Yanran and the various women, Madam Zhuang stopped wailing and introduced each member of the party.

Huang Xie realized that Ji Zhao the two women had "entered the sunset years" and did not pay them anymore attention, instead sizing up Youcui and Youning the two women spiritedly. Lastly, his vision rested on Madam Zhuang. His voice turning gentle, he said: "Princess should first come to my home and rest. We can then discuss everything else at leisure.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought that if she had not met himself on this trip, Madam Zhuang and the two You sisters could only have relied on sexual entrapment. This was because given Lord Chunshen's present display, it was clear that he was not really interested in helping them return to their country. One could make that conclusion just by seeing how he paid no attention to Zhuang Baoyi.

There were a few people behind Huang Xie who looked like lackeys. The rest were all valiant warriors.

Amongst the lackeys, there was one who was tall and big, with a beautiful beard that reached his chest. He had a long face with a crooked nose, extremely thin lips and two shining benevolent eyes that gave one a sense of amazement. He was carefully sizing up everyone, especially the exiled young heir apparent of Yunnan Zhuang Baoyi.

Zhuang Kong, who was behind Xiang Shaolong, saw him noticing the man and said softly: "That is Fang Zhuo!" As Xiang Shaolong nodded faintly, Madam Zhuang's melodic voice said: "We should not bother the Lord. You servant wishes to return to Yunnan's Prince's mansion.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest felt a little startled, and only then did they realize that the Zhuang family had an official residence in Shouchun.

Lord Chunshen betrayed an odd expression. He gave a dry cough and said: "Can we discuss this matter after we've retuned to my home?" Madam Zhuang's lovely body trembled a little. The delicate eyes behind the veil gazing at Lord Chunshen, said: "Lord, please may I know what is the matter?"

Lord Chunshen sighed and said: "Since the upheaval in Yunnan, Princess and the Little Prince hid in Qin, the Yunnan Prince's palace maids and servants have all dispersed. It was empty for a few years, but recently the Left Magistrate Li Chuangwen coveted the place, forced his way in and moved into the Prince's mansion. Although this Lord tried to negotiate with him many times, he held onto the late king's tacit promise and completely disregarded me. This Lord was also exceedingly dissatisfied."

Madam Zhuang's delicate body trembled severely and furiously said: "Where is heaven? The Lord must seek justice for your servant."

Lord Chunshen let out a bitter smile and softly said: "Sooner or later the Lord will teach this kid a lesson, but right now the situation is delicate. It is not advisable to act rashly. Princess is travel-worn, why don't you come to my home and rest first!" Xiang Shaolong quietly called for joy. There are countless people now in Shouchun who want to see Zhuang Baoyi dead. Nonetheless, because of the involvement of the ten over vassal states, nobody dares to make a move. Therefore as long as they can make a reasonable stand, they can wreak havoc. Riding on the wave, he laughed loudly and said: "I appreciate the Lord's good intentions. This time our return to Shouchun is precisely to get some justice. If we are timid and fearful, how can we accomplish this big task of returning to our country? The Lord please return home first. We have our own plans."

Lord Chunshen was startled and looked at Xiang Shaolong.

Wan Ruiguang is South Yunnan's famous general and even more is the South Yunnan people's famous leader, gifted in both civil and military arts. He has a

definite position in Chu. But unbelievably, he is so daring, showing clearly that he means to retake the Yunnan Prince's mansion.

Madam Zhuang's delicate body froze, and she almost raised her voice to stop him. Fortunately she remembered that Xiang Shaolong was an extraordinary man who possesses extraordinary methods, swallowing her words back into her stomach.

Lord Chunshen was worthy to be called one of the four great princes in the Warring States period. After muttering irresolutely for a while, replied: "This arbitrary and absurd act by Li Chuangwen was unpleasant to many people. It is because the Li clan interceded that the vassal states sent an envoy to lodge a formal protest, just that the late king sat on the issue. If General Wan does retake the Prince's mansion, nobody will dare say anything. Its just that there are many experts amongst Li Chuangwen's family commanders. It is hard to predict the outcome if a conflict arises. General Wan had better think twice (actually in Chinese it is think thrice, but I think we should use the common English phrase). It is inconvenient for this Lord to participate directly."

Xiang Shaolong was exultant. Since the circumstances was such, it was even more difficult to pass up this opportunity to demonstrate the Zhuang family's power and prestige. Once the common people realize that they have the ability to return to their country, because Yunnan is the chief of Chu's vassal states, even if the one holding power is Li Yuan, under the serious circumstances, he would have no choice but to help them settle this debt.

He coldly shouted and said: "On the contrary, I will go, even if up against countless people. Could the Lord first dispatch people to inform Li

Chuangwen, saying we want the Yunnan Prince's mansion returned immediately. We will use 'diplomacy first then violence'." This celebrated phrase from Meng Zi was something he learned in secondary school. Luckily the present circumstances allowed him to employ it, giving his study practical application.

A mysterious light shone in Lord Chunshen's eyes and he said: "Mister Wan is truly a towering figure. I, Huang Xie, am convinced. Come men!" Fang Zhuo voluntarily stepped forward and greeted, saying: "Let your servant take care of this matter!" Xiang Shaolong secretly laughed. Of course Fang Zhuo was going to tell Li Chuangwen and his experts how to give them a stiff battle.

But since they had Madam Zhuang and Zhuang Baoyi these two politically sensitive figures with them, no matter how many experts Li Chuangwen had, he would not dare to insult the widow in front of the multitudes. When its one to one, he will teach him who's boss.

The Yunnan Prince's mansion is in the heart of the inner castle, next to the king's palace. The entire street was filled either with guesthouses for foreign envoys or offices of the vassal states' envoys. That is why Li Chuangwen's forced taking of the Yunnan Prince's mansion was extremely offensive, being King Xiaolie's ploy to reduce the say of the vassal states and their power.

As King Xiaolie is already dead, Li Chuangwen's actions have lost all support, indirectly furthering the Zhuang family's cause to recapture the official residence.

All along, the court of the Chu king has always made the excuse that Li Ling's

rebellion was an internal affair of Yunnan, having nothing to do with the Chu court. Of course they did not officially recognize Li Ling's position so as to avoid provoking the other vassal states into disgust and secession.

If the vassal states were to submit to a strong Qin, Chu will lose the protective screen of the Southwest, thus greatly endangering the country.

With the backing of these advantageous situations, Xiang Shaolong is resolved to free his hand and create an epic work. The first person to be operated on will be Li Chuangwen.

Since he was not able to raise his hands and kill for real, Xiang Shaolong had borrowed a bundle of heavy wooden staves from Lord Chunshen and hidden them under Madam Zhuang's carriage before heading for the Yunnan Prince's mansion.

When they reached the Yunnan Prince's mansion, they found the gates wide open. More than two hundred warriors lined up on the field in front of the mansion. The display was indeed meant to intercept and intimidate their trivial delegation of just over forty people which included women and children.

It is the afternoon and the streets thronged with people, with no shortage of high ranking chancellors and ministers who live in the area, and also dignitaries from the Northeastern states and vassal states here to pay their respects to the late King Xiaolie. Seeing this kind of warlike display, everyone gathered round the mansion to watch the spectacle. Within a short time, there gathered a multitude of people. The atmosphere was boisterous.

With a solitary Xiang Shaolong at the head, the group determinedly tried to enter the Yunnan Prince's mansion.

There was someone on the stairs leading up to the mansion, shouting: "The approaching group please halt. Why are you breaking into my mansion?"

Xiang Shaolong and his party orderly and slowly dismounted their horses. The opposing two hundred over soldiers sealed off all their routes in a pincer movement. The main force was concentrated at the front gate of the mansion.

The sign at the top of the platform had been changed into horizontal tablet that said "The Honourable Magistrate Li's Mansion". He laughed coldly: "Who has plundered and occupied my Yunnan Prince's official residence? Report the name to me Wan Ruiguang."

That person, clearly being Li Chuangwen, was dressed in martial dress and looked quite powerful. Its a pity that he looked tacky and vulgar and his eyes were disproportionately small. His hands grasped his sword hilt and, laughing aloud, he said: "This is really laughable. The Yunnan king was unable to rule his country and was killed by his people five years ago. Where did you find this Yunnan king?"

Xiang Shaolong's worries decreased even more. Even the people of the Li clan do not dare to admit brazenly that Li Ling has succeeded the throne to avoid the calamity of having all the vassal states' revolt.

At this moment, Madam Zhuang and the women and children are still in the

carriage, being protected by the Ji and Zhao the two women guardians while Zhuang Kong and his party are outside guarding the carriage, allowing the rest to make their moves without worry.

Xiang Shaolong's eye gave a cold flash, and he shouted loudly saying: "What audacity! The heir apparent of my house is here. Who dares claim the king of Yunnan is not here? You, the mad man who has occupied the Yunnan King's residence by force, do you dare to follow me to debate this in front of the great king, to verify the state seal and official documents proving that Yunnan belongs to my family's heir apparent?"

Li Chuangwen smiled sardonically and said: "You are the mad man. Who knows if you are a confused official or a thief, manufacturing some false evidence to brag and swindle people. Quickly get lost. If not I will break all your dog legs." The street immediately burst into an uproar. All the observers expressed dissatisfaction with Li Chuangwen's harsh and barbaric ways. It was apparent that this person was normally despotic and unreasonable, offending many and pleasing few.

At this point Xiang Shaolong deliberately exhibited a timid attitude and said: "If you still do not believe me, I will personally visit the Empress Dowager to fight for some justice right now." In order for Li Chuangwen to seize power, how could he spare them? He laughed heartily and said: "Do you think it is that easy for you to leave? I will first tie you up and then bring you to the Empress Dowager!"

Another round of heckling came from outside the mansion. Li Chuangwen was really too much. Xiang Shaolong already knew that Li Chuangwen would

not let the matter drop so easily, and also knew he coveted the the seal of state and other items that he mentioned just now. With a cold laugh, he made a hand signal.

At this moment, the Li mansion soldiers on both sides have already started closing in on them.

Wu Shu and the rest immediately drew out the long staves from the bottom of the horse carriage and quickly tossed them to all the men.

Li Chuanwen finally felt that something was wrong, and gave a big shout: "Attack!" Xiang Shaolong, who had long been grasping his big staff, threw off his outer robe and exposed the warrior's outfit underneath. He jumped forward, leaping left and beating right. The enemies swords were being knocked out of their hands. In the midst of miserable cries, the encircling soldiers were counter-attacked by the guardians. One by one the enemy soldiers fell in the boiling confusion. Breaking arms and legs sounded in quick succession.

The thousands of spectators had the 'robbing the rich to give to the poor' mentality and had always hated the evil Li Chuangwen, fueling the momentum of Xiang Shaolong's party.

This group of enemy warriors had been cloistered and coddled all along. There was an unbridgeable gap between their battle ability and that of Xiang Shaolong and his guardians. In addition, the latter were able to exploit the heavy staves' one tactical advantage, which was their length. Even though the enemy outnumbered them more than ten to one, the former could not

react to the swift attacks and were utterly defeated.

After Xiang Shaolong and the guardians knocked down the seventy odd enemy soldiers in the field with their 'swifter than thunderbolt' methods, they regrouped and attacked up the stairs towards Li Chuangwen and his remaining hundred over soldiers.

Li Chuangwen could not imagine how formidable his attackers were and hysterically brandished his long sword while desperately ordering his underlings to rush forward to hinder the enemy. Xiang Shaolong was like a tiger that had been let out of its cage. He was stepping on the enemies groaning on the ground and annihilating those remaining with his staff. He even sent two people flying more than ten feet before ascending the uppermost section of stairs.

Wu Shu and the rest of the guardians all gave a gratifying shout, beating down every enemy soldier they ran into. All who engaged them had their legs broken, falling in all four directions covered in blood. More than ten were even beaten half to death on the spot.

Xiang Shalong flew towards Li Chuanwen like wind. One by one, all the remaining enemy warriors realized their own peril and scrambled out of his way.

Li Chuangwen was greatly alarmed by the situation and retreated into the inner mansion under the protection of ten over of his household commanders.

As Xiang Shaolong kicked down another person, he rushed into the main hall of the mansion, man and staff as one moving like a tornado. Outside the mansion lay more than a hundred fallen Li mansion soldiers.

When Li Chuangwen finally turned around, Xiang Shaolong, Wu Shu, Wu Guang, Jing Qi and the others had already arrived like his shadow. With an imposing air like the rainbow, they beat down the panicking soldiers in front of Li Chuangwen as if they were chopping melons and dicing vegetables. Li Chuangwen stood on the spot staring blankly, and while still grasping his long sword, he did not know how to respond and could not help but abandon his resistance.

Xiang Shaolong withdrew his staff, stood back and smiled, saying: "It appears you are not only a madman, but also a cowardly man!" Li Chuangwen's expression flitted back and forth, but eventually sheathed his sword and harshly retorted: "I am great Chu's magistrate, if you dare to touch one of my hairs....."

Before he had finished speaking, Xiang Shaolong made a hand signal and two wooden staves heavily struck his calf bone, producing the sound of breaking bones. Li Chuangwen fell to the ground miserably.

Xiang Shaolong then ordered: "Throw all the wild thieves who are occupying my Yunnan Prince's mansion out onto the streets." All the guardians acknowledged with a loud shout.

## Chapter 12

### The Revival of Prestige

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The events that unfolded after the recovery of the Dian King's Mansion totally exceeded the expectations of Xiang Shaolong and the rest. The first to arrive and congratulate them was Lord Chunshen, followed by the maids, servants and warriors of the Dian King's Mansion who had been recently expelled. They were then followed by the representatives and even kings of each vassal state who had come for King Xiaolie's funeral, the envoys of each of the Eastern states, and finally the famous generals and chancellors who had esteemed the Zhuang family all along. This kept Madam Zhuang and Xiang Shaolong busy with incessant receptions and parties.

At dusk, the Empress Dowager Li Yanyan summoned Madam Zhuang and Zhuang Baoyi, but did not include Xiang Shalolong. Xiang Shaolong knew that he had been successful in raising the power and prestige of the Zhuang family. With ease of mind, he left Madam Zhuang the mother and son under the escort of Lord Chunshen to enter the palace for the meeting with Li Yanyan and her two plus year-old crown prince. Fortunately, the two You sisters remained to receive and entertain the guests, reducing the chances for a slip-up on his part. As they were beginning to get dizzy and confused with the volume of guests, a servant announced: "Lord Longyang from Wei seeks an audience!" Xiang Shaolong was delighted and after exhorting the You sisters to continue entertaining the other guests, instructed the servant to usher Lord Longyang into the inner hall.

Lord Longyang was puzzled at this arrangement and could only stare blankly on seeing Xiang Shaolong once he arrived inside. Xiang Shaolong rose from his seat and welcomed him, saying: "This time I have fooled you again!" Lord Longyang could not believe it and widened his 'graceful eyes', and in a small voice said: "Xiang Shaolong!" Xiang Shaolong pulled him to a seat in a corner and laughed, saying: "Who else could it be?"

Lord Longyang delightedly said: "You know that Tian Dan has arrived here!" Xiang Shaolong smiled and nodded.

Lord Longyang sighed and said: "You have the ability to know everything about heaven and earth. The last time it was Dong Horse Fanatic, now it is Wan Ruiguang. You've caused me to be worried for you. When I arrived here three days ago to discover Tian Dan flaunting himself spiritedly, I thought you had been killed by him!"

Xiang Shaolong then explained everything, not knowing why he trusts this 'boyfriend' wholeheartedly. Lord Longyang is finally aware of Tian Dan's escape using a body double. In a flash of realization, he said: "No wonder the Liu brothers, Dan Chu and the others have all disappeared. I must say, though, you can be proud of yourself, having caused him to be so frightened as to slip away so ignominiously!"

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Is the Lord here to attend King Xiaolie's funeral?" Lord Longyang replied: "Of course it is so on the surface, but in reality I hope to wrest the Chu people from Tian Dan's hands. We now know that Tian Dan, Li Yuan and Lu Buwei have made a secret pact to divide the whole world between themselves."

Xiang Shaolong said: "If the Lord helps me to kill Tian Dan, wouldn't it solve all problems?" Lord Longyang thought that this was reasonable, and nodding, he said: "If you can restore the crown prince of Dian to his throne, you will teach the Chu people to think twice about having malicious intents. Though the situation is so complicated! Eventually we will still need to deal with your Qin state, isn't this a great contradiction?" Xiang Shaolong replied: "That is a problem for the future. If we do not deal with Lu Buwei's plot, we will face immediate catastrophe. Therefore killing Tian Dan will definitely be beneficial for you and for me.

Lord Longyang forced a bitter smile and said: "I am afraid that under heaven, there is only one Xiang Shaolong that I cannot refuse. Soon you will be seeing a lot of old friends too!"

Xiang Shaolong said: "Thats got to be Han Chuang, right?" Lord Longyang said: "This person Han Chuang is not very reliable, its better not to reveal yourself to him, else he might betray you under certain circumstances."

Xiang Shaolong then asked about Zhao Ya. Lord Longyang said: "She has already followed your family members back to Xianyang. The crown prince has expended a lot of effort to do this because all along, Han Jing was not willing to let her go. Once women get jealous, they disregard the bigger picture."

This was a big weight off Xiang Shaolong's mind. Following up, he asked: "Who else is here from each country?" Lord Longyang counted on his fingers and replied: "From Zhao, it is Guo Kai. This guy is now highly favored. With him messing around, I think Lian Po will soon lose his position."

Xiang Shaolong knew that for him to be so certain, there must have been some affair behind in his words. He couldn't help but give a gloomy sigh, but his hands were tied.

Lord Longyang continued: "From Wei, it should be Prince Dan. Nonetheless it is certainly odd that to date there has been no news of him." Xiang Shaolong was also unable to figure this out. If Prince Dan's men had sent news using swift horses from the Wei border to Shouchun, they would have arrived seventy days before he did. There was no reason for the lack of news.

All the envoys had to make official correspondence before arriving. If there was as yet no news of Prince Dan, it was possible that he would not be able to arrive in time for the funeral in half a month.

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Did Qin send anyone?" Lord Longyang replied: "Qin has always had a close relationship with Chu, not to mention that it was a rare time of peace, of course they will send someone. The odd thing, however, is that the person sent is not Lu Buwei, but Premier Xu Xian."

Xiang Shaolong's heart was jolted, with a faint feeling of unease.

Lord Longyang was astounded and said: "Is there any problem? Why did Shaolong's expression turn so ugly?" Xiang Shaolong replied: "I do not yet know what is the problem. Could the Lord do me a favor? Find out which route Xu Xian is taking to Shouchun. This is an urgent matter."

Lord Longyang understood immediately and his color began to change, saying: "I will dispatch people to do this immediately. If they are passing

through my Great Wei, I will send soldiers to protect him. Humph! This could be a plot to implicate my Great Wei."

Xiang Shaolong hadn't thought of this point. It did not matter whether Xu Xian chose to go through Han or Wei, if Lu Buwei caused him to be assassinated in either country, a tempest would ensue. Lu Buwei could then send the Army to attack Han or Wei.

He did not think that Lu Buwei would remain so formidable after Mo Ao died.

Both men no longer had the mood to talk, and Lord Longyang left in a hurry.

It was dark by the time they had sent off all the guests.

Xiang Shaolong was so hungry that his stomach growled and he hurriedly returned to the courtyard of his residence. The two ladies Ji and Zhao had just had a bath and were waiting for him to come in for dinner.

The Dian King's Mansion was medium sized and composed of a master house with six courtyard houses surrounded by high walls.

Each courtyard house was composed of houses in a square with a courtyard in the middle. It was an inward looking design, with practically all doors and windows opening into the courtyard. There were trees planted all over the houses such that even though the hot summer was approaching, it was still very cool and shady.

The exits were all designed to face South, and the houses were symmetrical

left and right with an obvious central axis.

The main buildings faced the main entrance, with wings left and right.

Xiang Shaolong and the guardians occupied two of the courtyard houses. The place was spacious and wide yet cozy and snug and gave one the feeling of having returned home.

After Xiang Shaolong had had his fill, he heaved a sigh and started relating his conversation with Lord Longyang and his worries about Xu Xian. After listening, Ji Yanran was speechless.

Zhao Zhi said: "Premier Xu is one of Western Qin's two big 'Tiger Generals'. He should be able to defend himself!" Ji Yanran said: "The most worrisome thing is if there are Lu Buwei's spies amongst his men. Premier Xu will least expect the attackers to be soldiers that Li Yuan has hidden on the borders of Han and Wei. That is a dangerous situation."

She knitted her eyebrows again, saying: "Although Qin and Chu have a close relationship, sending someone from the king's clan would have been more appropriate. There has got to be a reason for this."

Xiang Shaolong said: "It is easy to find some political pretext like having to sign a peace treaty with Chu to force Xu Xian to come. Even though the Empress Dowager's dissatisfaction with Lu Buwei is increasing steadily, it is difficult to rely on this discredited person to do anything. This is because the Qin military has always looked down on this Empress Dowager."

Ji Yanyran has the utmost respect for Xu Xian, and worriedly sighed, saying: "At this point we can only resign ourselves to heaven's will!" At this moment, Zhuang Kong came over with an invitation, saying that Madam Zhuang had returned and would like to speak to him in person.

Xiang Shaolong could only control his feelings and follow Zhuang Kong out.

Madam Zhuang is wearing a 'Swallow Tail Coat'. The long coat-tail of the garment is cut in a triangular shape and folded over, simulating a swallow's tail, hence its name.

She is reclining on a couch beside a louvered window at the central courtyard. She was in high-spirits as she watched Xiang Shaolong enter. Her fine hair was drawn in a weighted bun and fastened with a golden hairpin which shimmered under the lamplight, accentuating her grandeur, grace and allure.

Her waist was girded with a strand of distinctly shaped jade ornaments, increasing the magnificence and prosperity befitting her status as a noblewoman.

After Zhuang Kong left, Madam Zhuang stood up and moved in front of Xiang Shaolong's. Smiling sweetly, she said: "Your servant came back a long time ago, but wanted to take a bath and change her clothes before meeting you. Can you smell the bath fragrance on my body?" Saying that, she proudly stuck out her silky bosom. Xiang Shaolong figured that the women from the Tu clan of Southern Dian were especially liberal, straightforwardly and brazenly luring men. He also figured, though, that this was also her way of

thanking him. He laughed faintly: "Seeing Madam's demeanor, one can tell that this trip to the Chu palace reaped a good result, is your servant wrong?" Madam Zhuang raised her pair of jade-like hands and pressed them against the pit of her stomach, and smiling enchantingly, said: "Shaolong, your pulse is racing."

As Xiang Shaolong was beginning to feel embarrassed, Madam Zhuang released her hands and glided towards the window in a movingly graceful and delicate step. With her back to him, she glazed at the moonlit courtyard, and gently said: "Xiang Shaolong truly enjoys a well-deserved reputation. With just one dazzling move, you have shaken the entire Shouchun. Now nobody dares to look down on us few stateless women and children. All the vassal states have made clear their position, supporting our return to our country. The only obstacle is actually the Chu court."

Xiang Shaolong had to make a move in the five steps it took for him to walk behind her. He asked: "How was Li Yanyan's attitude towards you?" Madam Zhuang replied: "I assumed initially that Li Yanyan would be a very formidable person, but besides being beyond my expectations, she merely came across as a gentle and emotional person, even hinting at some unspeakable grief and sadness. She is of course a rare beauty, even being comparable with your Talented Lady Ji. What surprised me the most, though, was that she was closer to Lord Chunshen than Li Yuan. This is truly difficult to understand."

Xiang Shaolong was dazed as he heard this. Could Li Yanyan be such a pitiful character? Madam Zhuang turned around and leaned against the window. The corners of her mouth broke into an enchanting smile, with the tips of her eyebrows and the corners of her eyes exuding limitless charm. With both

shoulders rising lightly, she said: "Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen are both interested in your servant's body. What should your servant do?" Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "What does Madam want me to say?" Madam Zhuang laughed in distress, saying: "I have seen the likes of such men countless times. If your servant had not fallen for you, in order to secure their support, she would not have been miserly with her body. Now instead, she feels like seeking your opinion first. Under heaven, there is no one else able to gain your servant's confidence."

As Xiang Shaolong was considering whether she was trying to confuse him, Madam Zhuang took a step toward him and pasted her body into his bosom and embraced his waist with all her strength, her pert face buried in his broad shoulders. She moaned: "Embrace me, ok? I need a big strong man to support me."

He would be lying if he said he wasn't moved under such a circumstance, when such a noble, lovable and charming rarity threw herself into his arms. Xiang Shaolong could not help but embrace her firmly and caressing her well rounded and elastic back muscles, gently said: "Madam does not need to do this. Even if we do not have a physical relationship, I, Xiang Shaolong, will never break a promise. I am determined to help the young crown prince ascend the throne.

Madam Zhuang looked up and smiled sweetly, saying: "Do you think your servant treats you like other men? No! You are wrong! I saw you in a dream last night. Ai! Its a pity that our fling of passion will have to end once my son ascends the throne. When I think of this I can't help feeling that there is no more joy in this life."

She suddenly left his embrace and pulled him to a seat beside her. Her expression turned solemn and she said: "Li Yanyan has verified the legitimacy of me and my son's status, but Li Yuan is using the excuse of pressure from a strong Qin to avoid sending troops to assist us mother and son. I do not know if Lord Chunshen is afraid of offending the Li clan, but he is vague and indecisive. Every other party's verbal support is just that. They are unlikely to lend substantial assistance. Our fate hence lies in Shaolong's hands.

To comfort her, Shaolong softly said: "I have a large and powerful army at the Qin-Chu border. At the appropriate time they can dress up as Dian people and invade the Dian capital. If I manage to kill Tian Dan, though, I will need to slip away immediately, else it will be difficult for me to leave Shouchun. At this point, the only way for Li Yuan to deal with you is to keep you under house arrest in the Chu capital. This way, he will also be able to play with your body, killing two birds with one stone."

Madam Zhuang's countenance changed, saying: "I haven't considered this problem."

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help hugging her shoulders, and softly said: "The most critical thing for you to do now is to look like a 'damsel in distress'. Might as well play along with Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen, pretending that you will be helpless if the Chu court does not send troops. You will be able to fool everyone this way."

Madam Zhuang nibbled her lip and said: "Are you suggesting that I should sacrifice my body? I was originally set on this course of action, but with you around, I no longer feel like doing it."

Xiang Shaolong discerned that her feelings for him were genuine, and since he is used to philandering, couldn't help but kiss her cheek, gently saying: "What is easily obtained is not treasured. You must be ambiguous with those who have designs on you, periodically leading them on and periodically resisting them. By the time their passions boil over, we would have left the Chu capital long ago. If I cannot kill Tian Dan before the Chu king's funeral, I will have no choice but to give up and wholeheartedly help you return to your country."

Madam Zhuang had an intoxicated expression, and said in a muffled voice: "The more I interact with you, the more I realize how fearsome and formidable you are. Yet you are also a passionate and righteous hero. This is such a contradiction. Shaolong Ah! I have fallen into your hands so easily, do you despise me?" Xiang Shaolong thought: I have yet to enter the room and mount the couch, how does this count 'as falling into my hands'? Of course he could not actually say that, and so he softly said: "Before the crown prince returns home, we cannot have a physical relationship. That will cause us to wallow in an ocean of lust, causing us to neglect the important matters. We must 'endure hardship to accomplish our ambitions'. Only by working assiduously and whetting ourselves, can we succeed in this great cause."

Madam Zhuang almost moaned: "You have beautiful women in your house, how can that be called 'enduring hardship'? Using this to describe me is just about right. Shaolong ah! Wu....."

Xiang Shaolong gave her fragrant lips a lingering kiss, saying: "If a woman is sexually satisfied, she will show it in her expression, and philandering old hands like Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen are sure to notice. It will then be hard

for Madam to play her tricks with them. This is an extremely subtle matter. Madam must listen to what I say."

Madam Zhuang came to her senses, straightened her body and said: "Your servant understands, but please do not forget your promise. When the matter of returning to our country is accomplished, I will not let you go."

Xiang Shaolong gave her another lingering kiss, then left for his own courtyard, intensely wishing for Ji Yanran the two ladies. Only they can appease the lust that this outstandingly foxy and amorous woman has stirred up in him. In this dangerous place where life and death hangs on a hair, he did not wish for anything to affect his grand plan, and that includes male-female relationships.

If he is not able to kill Tian Dan in the next fifteen days, he will slip away immediately and without the slightest hesitation.

As important as killing Tian Dan is, it cannot compare to the lives of Ji and Zhao the two ladies and the guardians, not to mention his family members Wu Tingfang and Xiang Bao'er, and the tragic Zhao Ya who was bitterly awaiting him at his home.

It is only now that he understands the meaning of the saying 'Heros have it difficult'.

## Chapter 13

### History Repeats Itself

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The "Keng Qiang" sound resonated without pause.

Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi and the guardians together with the You sisters watched the Dian Prince Zhuang Baoyi quite credibly exchanging sword moves with Jing Shan.

Of course all the ladies were cheering for this child. Jing Shan relied on his agility, defending but not attacking.

"Dang!"

In the end, Zhuang Baoyi was still small and weak, and the sword fell on the ground as he lost his grip momentarily.

He was however not discouraged and rolled on the ground, picked up his sword and continued fighting.

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised him, and called for a halt to the exercise. After imparting some basic skills for him to self-drill, he approached the You sisters for his make-up. Ji Yanran and the rest also retreated to the inner hall to avoid being spotted for their exceptional looks.

Having witnessed his godly exhibition the day before, the You sisters adored

him even more. With firry passions rising, it was fortunate that Xiang Shaolong had just fought a great battle with Ji Yanran and Zhao Zhi the previous night, and was simply willing but unable, else something might have slipped.

Xiang Shaolong had undergone strict military training so he understood that during a critical time of operations, too much licentious behavior brought mind and body much harm and little benefit.

The two ladies also understood Xiang Shaolong's difficulties from Madam Zhuang, and merely hinted at him with their usual affectionate chatter.

Once they had finished with the make-up, the two ladies were unwilling to let him go and compelled him to lie on the couch while they gave him a Chinese style massage.

After a few strokes, he became so comfortable and relaxed that he fell asleep.

When he awoke, the two ladies were on either side massaging his feet, causing him to feel as if he was floating in the clouds. It was an out of this world feeling.

Youcui laughed and said: "Did you sleep well?" Youning then said: "Lord Longyang came to look for you. He's been waiting outside for a good fifteen minutes."

Xiang Shaolong was startled and sat up, saying: "Why didn't you wake me?"

Youcui then came over and helped him put his clothes on, and said with a voice as tender and soft as water: "We couldn't bear to do it! When Xiang Sir takes his bath tonight, we will give you another massage!" Xiang Shaolong has gotten used to their meticulous and unfettered serving spirit, for which they even put aside all propriety between men and women. Nodding his head, he requested to get up.

Youning pulled at his sleeve and said plaintively: "Isn't Xiang Sir going to give us sisters a little reward?" Xiang Shaolong thought about how men in this era went about freely playing with beautiful women, and decided to go with the flow. Unable to resist the temptation, he gave both both of them a deep kiss before stumbling out to meet Lord Longyang.

Perhaps it was because he was meeting Xiang Shaolong today, this beautiful man's face had a special glow. After he had sat down, accepted some fragrant tea from a servant and taken a few sips, Lord Longyang said: "This matter with Tian Dan is particularly thorny. Tian Dan is now residing in the Chu palace with Li Yuan as his neighbor. He is thus very well defended. In my opinion, unless we are able to know when he leaves the palace, we are unable to assassinate him."

Xiang Shaolong felt a headache coming and said: "Is there any way to create a map of the imperial palace?" Lord Longyang said awkwardly: "It could be possible with a little more time, but in my opinion, Tian Dan will definitely rush back to Qi right after King Xiaolie's funeral..... Ai!"

Xiang Shaolong asked: "What kind of defences does the Chu palace have?" Lord Longyang replied: "I'm not too clear about this, but matters will be

difficult even with just the moat, the high walls and the sentry post, much less with the fact that we do not know where in the palace Tian Dan is residing.

Xiang Shaolong said: "All large aristocratic residences will have a secret passageway for escape....."

Lord Longyang interrupted: "You can stop thinking about this possibility. Even with our Wei Palace, there are people round the clock monitoring the ground for the sound of human activity. Else, wouldn't all the officials lose their lives once someone digs a tunnel into the palace?" Xiang Shaolong said: "Doesn't Tian Dan need to attend banquets? If we know when he is going to which meeting, can't we assassinate him en route?" Lord Longyang said disappointingly: "Even though the Chu people have been labeled as Southern barbarians, they abide by customs even more strictly than us people from the Northern states. All banquets and festivities have been forbidden before the Chu king's funeral. This tactic will get you nowhere."

Xiang Shaolong was extremely vexed, and said: "Is there anyone at all who is able to lure Tian Dan out of the palace? Ai! As long as we know where in the palace Tian Dan is staying, we may yet have a method."

At this moment he is thinking of how he used the sewers to infiltrate Zhao Mu's residence. The Chu Palace is much bigger though, and he does not have an answer for that. It was also unclear how convenient or suitable the Chu Palace's sewers were, therefore he had to admit that this method was unlikely to work.

Lord Longyang suddenly lowered his voice and said: "Is that Dian Princess very beautiful?" Xiang Shaolong replied curiously: "She is certainly extraordinarily moving. Could it be that the Lord....."

Lord Longyang's 'pretty face' turned red, saying: "Please do not misunderstand. When I was at Lord Chunshen's residence last night, Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen were both praising the Dian Princess, saying that such a foxy and charming woman as her was rarer than one in ten thousand. At that time Tian Dan, Han Chuang and Guo Kai were all present. They were all moved. That is why I thought maybe the Dian Princess would be able to lure Tian Dan into our trap! Nonetheless it is still difficult to come up with a concrete and practical plan."

Xiang Shalong said: "Did they talk about me?" Lord Longyang flashed him a look and said: "How could I have leaked your secret? They were equally amazed at your skill, determination and movements. Only, no matter how much they crack their heads, there is no way they will associate you with Xiang Shaolong. Even your servant could not recognize you, the others can forget about it."

Because Xiang Shaolong thought of Lord Longyang as at least half a woman, and also because of their profound friendship, no matter how lasciviously Lord Longyang acted, he felt amiable friendship rather than disgust.

Laughing, he asked: "When Li Yuan talked about Wan Ruiguang, did he display any rage?" Lord Longyang replied: "On the contrary, he did not. In my opinion, there is a fierce internecine power struggle within the Li clan. Last night, Li Yuan actually rained curses on Li Chuangwen's ignorance, saying it

served him right to have both his legs broken."

Xiang Shaolong asked in confusion: "How was Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan's relationship?" Lord Longyang replied: "It was very good. When Li Yuan meets Lord Chunshen, its like when a mouse meets a cat, being excessively deferential and ingratiating. I think Li Yuan must have some plan to deal with Lord Chunshen, if not he would not need to prostrate himself so."

Lord Longyang continued: "Have you seen Li Yanyan? I think besides the Talented Lady Ji, there is none more beautiful and delicate. Nonetheless, her brows and eyes speak of an interminable sorrow, causing one's heart to ache on her behalf."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly: "Its a pity that she has no intention of meeting me. Otherwise I would be able to validate the Lord's impressions."

Lord Longyang muttered to himself irresolutely for a while, then said: "I sent people to investigate the whereabouts of Xu Xian, but I am afraid we were late by one step, causing me to be extremely worried."

Xiang Shaolong lightly patted his shoulder, saying: "Do not worry. As long as I, Xiang Shaolong, am around, Qin soldiers will not invade Wei's borders."

Lord Longyang celebrated and said: "I will trust you with this matter then."

The two of them discussed a little more, only to discover that there and then it was difficult to think of a way to assassinate Tian Dan. Lord Longyang then left for a prior appointment.

Just as Lord Longyang had left, Li Yuan and Lord Chunshen arrived together.

Xiang Shaolong naturally let Madam Zhuang deal with them, but before he could return to Ji and Zhao the two ladies' courtyard, Zhuang Kong came to invite him to the main building to meet the guests. He could only brace himself and go.

As he raised his foot to walk into the main hall, he deliberately altered his gait and posture. He walked directly towards Madam Zhuang, Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan who were seated in a host versus guest arrangement. The hall was surrounded by the two men's personal guards.

As Lord Longyang expected, Li Yuan did not once suspect the Wan Ruiguang who was standing there and greeting him. Lord Chunshen acted according to his status and sat coolly.

Li Yuan greeted and said: "General Wan is indeed an extraordinary person. It is no wonder that the moment you stepped into Shouchun, you have become a household name."

After Xiang Shaolong returned the courtesy, he used his modified voice with the thick Dian accent and speaking in the Zhou language, and said: "Compared with the Lord and Imperial Uncle, I, Wan Ruiguang is only fit to be some small seat-bearing manservant! Imperial Uncle is too polite."

Madam Zhuang, seeing that Li Yuan was totally unsuspecting, let go of her worries and happily said: "Imperial Uncle's visit to our home today is precisely to meet you Ruiguang!"

Xiang Shaolong secretly mused that the two of them were really just looking for an excuse to look for you the woman who is rarer than one in ten thousand. The smiling Li Yuan who was sitting on her left lowered his head.

After gazing deeply at Madam Zhuang, Li Yuan turned his head and said to Xiang Shaolong: "General Wan is a famous general from Southern Dian, does he have a grand plan to reclaim his country?"

Xiang Shaolong was paying attention to Madam Zhuang's motions. He saw that when Li Yuan was looking at her, she became subconsciously frenetic and lowered her gaze. He exclaimed mentally, knowing that Li Yuan was using his bright and handsome appearance, charming style of conversation and elegant demeanor to confuse Madam Zhuang's heart. That is why she is behaving so abnormally.

He replied directly: "This is precisely our objective for coming to Shouchun. If the King could divert a group of horses and men under the small official's command, there is hope that we can defeat the thief in one move and recapture the Dian land.

Lord Chunshen coughed drily, saying: "This matter needs further deliberation. Since the late King is newly deceased and the Crown Prince (of Chu) is still young, everything should be decided after the funeral. I hope that Princess and Mister Wan is able to appreciate the circumstances."

Just as Xiang Shaolong was musing that things were going well, he saw Li Yuan once again using his meaningful glances to provoke Madam Zhuang, but Lord Chunshen did not notice this.

Li Yuan revealed a smile that even Xiang Shaolong had to admit was good-looking, and gently said: "The Empress Dowager treated the Dian Princess with familiarity at first sight. Whats more, she is now a little distressed in anticipation of the late King's funeral. Let me invite Princess and little Crown Prince (of Dian) to the palace to stay for a few days and let us show our hospitality as hosts.

Xiang Shaolong was startled and gave a silent cry of warning.

Once Madam Zhuang and Zhuang Baoyi enter the palace, they would no longer be able to step out freely. Moreover, with Li Yuan's ploy, as Madam Zhuang has not been 'cultivated' for a long time, obtaining her body would take little effort. When that happens, the consequences would be difficult to predict.

He busily tried signaling to Madam Zhuang with his eyes.

Madam Zhuang lowered her head in understanding and dimly said: "I appreciate Empress Dowager's kind feelings. I am but a person who has lost her country. It is difficult to extinguish the constant worry I have about the Dian restoration. How would I dare to serve the Empress Dowager with my worried countenance? Hope that Imperial Uncle can convey my difficulties to the Empress Dowager."

Li Yuan stopped talking immediately, merely nodding his head slightly in agreement.

Lord Chunshen was also trying to push his agenda with Madam Zhuang, and

gently said: "Princess should come over to my place for a couple of days so as to avoid staying in this place of mixed memories. Once the late King has been put to rest and affairs return to normal, this Lord will use all his strength to support the little Crown Prince (of Dian)'s restoration to the throne."

Madam Zhuang naturally understood the meaning behind Lord Chunshen's words. Remembering what Xiang Shaolong said about periodically leading on and periodically resisting, she first flashed Lord Chunshen a coquettish look, and then hung her head and lightly said: "After the funeral period, ok? Your servant suffered a minor illness on the way and have yet to recover up to today. She hopes to rest a few more days. Lets discuss this again after she recovers." Seeing her pitiful appearance and thinking about last night's kiss, even Xiang Shaolong's brain became feverish. Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan each showed an expression of 'communicating with loving glances'.

A beautiful woman's charm is irresistible to men.

Especially a beauty who has yet to be caught in one's hands.

Li Yuan appeared to be deeply concerned and said: "I will find the palace's best doctor to come and look at Madam's illness!"

Madam Zhuang could't decline and could only give her thanks.

Lord Chunshen and Li Yuan could not find any other excuse to remain and could only stand up and leave.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was heaving a sigh of relief, Li Yuan warmly pulled his

sleeve and said: "I have yet to have a proper chat with General Wan. Why don't you have a simple meal at my home!"

Xiang Shaolong was happy on the one hand but alarmed on the other. The happy thing was of course having the opportunity to go into the palace. The alarming thing was that without Madam Zhuang around to look after him, he could accident give the game away. Nonetheless however he feels, it would be difficult for him to get away from this.

Its just that he did not understand why Li Yuan would want to win him over.

Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan got into the latter's horse carriage while Lord Chunshen returned to his home on his own.

Li Yuan smiled slightly and asked: "Regarding Brother Wan's matter of reclaiming his country, what is his estimation?" Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "During the Dian rebellion, only a handful of us from the Zhuang family and the Wan family were able to escape. Even though all the peoples of Dian wish for our return, Li Ling has the support of the Yelang people, hence our chance of success without external help is small."

Li Yuan ferociously said: "I have long despised this Li Ling person. Though we are clansmen, we share no affection at all. After stealing the country for himself, he raised an army and occupied land all around, clearly a man with the wild ambition of wolves. It is nonetheless difficult to expect the Empress Dowager to agree to dispatch a large army. Dian is just too far away. If we cannot capture the Dian capital in one move and the fighting is prolonged, things will be chaotic and Qin will seize the opportunity to invade. That would

be extremely unfavorable to my Great Chu."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that there were at least two factions in the Li clan, and that Dou Jie and Cheng Suning were supporting Li Ling's faction.

Because Li Yuan could not reliably influence his younger sister Li Yanyan, it was clear that Li Yanyan would follow the imperial decrees that King Xiaolie left behind, intending to use Li Ling to subdue the vassal state, once again making it a part of Chu's territory.

Li Yuan has nonetheless seen through Li Ling's wild ambitions, and knows that Li Ling just wants to grow his own power. This is a menace to Li Yuan.

The situation could be even more complicated, but this would be beyond Xiang Shaolong's field of view.

Xiang Shaolong is beginning to understand that what's on the surface and what's underneath and reality are completely different.

Li Yuan noticed Xiang Shaolong's dumbstruck look, but mistook it for dejection at the diminishing chances him to reclaim his country. He grabbed Xiang Shaolong's shoulders, and putting on an earnest expression, said: "Brother Wan may not believe what I am going to say, but the one most opposed to sending troops to Dian is Lord Chunshen Huang Xie." Xiang Shaolong almost lost his voice, and exclaimed: "What?" Li Yuan replied: "That is why I said that it would difficult for Brother Wan to believe. The circumstances now are very different. The vassal states have amassed armies and are now more self-assured. Imperial decrees are hard to pass. They are

also beyond the reach of the court, and are hard to suppress by force. That is why Lord Chunshen opposes the restoration of your country."

Xiang Shaolong forced a smile and said: "Imperial Uncle is really forthright."

Li Yuan said: "However, I have a completely different viewpoint. The vassal states' rise is already fait accompli. To continue subverting them merely adds to the chaos and confusion, producing little results for much work. Worse, we will nurture even more new powers like Li Ling. That is why I have always fully supported your reclamation of Dian."

Xiang Shaolong actually believed his words.

This was because it was Lord Chunshen's lackey Fang Zhuo who actually leaked the news of Madam Zhuang mother and son's present Shouchun trip to Cheng Suning. It was hard to believe that Fang Zhuo would benefit from this if Lord Chunshen had not orchestrated the whole thing.

Lord Chunshen is playing the good guy on the surface, but is actually hamstringing the Zhuang family in the dark.

Politics is dirty after all.

Li Yuan is also not a saint, but is merely doing it for himself, since it appears that Li Yanyan is presently closer to Lord Chunshen. There are even people in the Li clan who are standing on Lord Chunshen's side, causing Li Yuan to feel extremely threatened. A further reason could be that he saw that Wan Ruiguang was perceptive and valiant, and wanted to rope him in to his side.

He is sure to have an even more formidable plot in the background to deal with himself.

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and said: "Actually I do not doubt Imperial Uncle's words. This is because we were almost harmed by villains on the way here."

He then related the entire account of how Chen Suning disguised his men as boatmen to sink their ship.

Li Yuan said happily: "In that case I can save my breath. If Brother Wan is willing to collaborate with me, I will guarantee the reclamation of your country. It is just a question of whether Brother Wan has the courage." How could Xiang Shaolong not know what this was all about? He pretended to be unafraid and said: "As long as my Dian is returned, I, Wan Ruiguang will go through fire and water with no reservations."

Li Yuan lowered his voice and said: "Then you must first kill Lord Chunshen."

Xiang Shaolong immediately brought to mind the former incident where Prince Xinling asked him assassinate the Wei King. Unexpectedly, history has repeated itself again.

End of Book 15